Richard Slotkin Oral History Interview, Feb. 25, 2014

Nancy Smith
NANCY SMITH: I know you graduated from Brooklyn University and then went on to Brown for your PhD---

RICHARD SLOTKIN: Brooklyn College, actually.

Smith: Brooklyn College, I apologize. What was it that really got you interested in your field of study?

Slotkin: My field is American Studies, which is the interdisciplinary study of American culture. When I was in junior high school we had in our house a copy of Vernon Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought*, which is one of the basic books in American Studies. I just liked the way Parrington wrote about literature, moving freely back and forth between literature, politics, political ideas, literary ideas, and so on. And then when I went to Brooklyn College, they had American Civilization as a major.

The Chairman, and really the mainstay of the program, was John Hope Franklin, who became eventually the dean of African American Studies, the leading African American scholar of American History in the United States. He just opened my eyes, and was a model to me of what a professor should be, what a man should be, what a scholar should be. Also, I’d always been preoccupied with the question of race in American history, racial inequality in American history, and he was just a terrific guide to that subject. I knew in high school I’d do something like American Civ, so, from that point, I just pursued that right through graduate school.

Smith: What did you do at Brown?

Slotkin: I was really quite naive about graduate studies and PhD programs in general. I’d been planning to teach in high school, and my freshman English teacher said, “You know, you really should teach at the college level,” and I said---”Oh, is that something someone can do?” And she replied with what was basically the 1960s equivalent of “Dude!”
So I started looking around and there was a poster on the bulletin board at the English Department of Brooklyn College that simply said: American Civilization Program at Brown. And that was it.

I knew of only four programs at that point and I applied. And I got a fellowship at Brown, so I went to Brown.

Smith: I love it when it’s simple like that. One thing I noticed is that you got your PhD at Brown in 1967, but you started work at Wesleyan in 1966.

Slotkin: Yes. Well I finished--I want to get the dates right--I finished my dissertation in the spring of ’66 and I applied for the Wesleyan job at the same time. The degree was technically not awarded until the following June, but I had completed all the requirements for the degree and had a paper from them to say that I had done that, so I qualified for the Assistant Professorship at Wesleyan.

There are some interesting things about that. It took me three years to finish my dissertation--

Smith: That’s pretty fast!

Slotkin: Yes. Thanks to my wife, who, after a year in Providence said, “Get me out of here or I’m gone!” Providence was then not what it has since become, which is a very nice little city. It was known among us then as “The Armpit of New England.”

And I didn’t like being a student. I wanted to be a teacher, so I got out as fast as I could.

Smith: What made you aim for Wesleyan? Did you know people there?

Slotkin: No. I applied broadcast. It was a different procedure in those days, and also in those days I was fairly naive about how one went about this. I simply sent letters to every place I could conceivably want to teach at, and was invited for interviews by Wesleyan, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Georgetown at the MLA meeting.

I knew nothing about Wesleyan, except that it was in a really nice location for me since I wanted to stay close to New York, where my family was. So, at the interview, the Wesleyan and Chicago people were the only ones who were really interested in American Studies and in the interdisciplinary aspect of things.
Of the two, the interviewer for Wesleyan, Jay Parsons, was the most enthusiastic about the idea. He said essentially: “We have a very small program, it is going to disappear because the one one person who did it is leaving. I think it is a very good program for us to have. If you come here, we'll help you start it.”

Well, he’s talking to a not-quite PhD graduate student--and I was at the time 23--and he’s saying: “Come here and we’ll empower you.”

That, plus the location, is what attracted me to Wesleyan. However, I also got a kind of counter message when I was interviewing. I was told that, as a Jew, I should not expect to get tenure at Wesleyan.

Smith: I read that in the copy of your talk on the Junior Faculty Organization. I was quite blown away--to think of hearing that in 1966?

Slotkin: I am the first Jew to get tenure in the English Department at Wesleyan, and this was communicated to me as a kind of general thing. In fact, it was not quite that way. There were departments in which that was true, and English was one of those departments. I think that was why I was told that

So I came here with this kind of doubled picture of Wesleyan. And both pieces were right. That is to say: It is a place that is extremely receptive to new ideas from new people, and you also have this history of discrimination, which was still a reality.

Smith: I never heard anything about that when I arrived in 1981.

Slotkin: Of course you wouldn’t. And I have to say that, in the latter days here, whenever I have alluded to this period, I’ve tended to get denials that this was ever the case, from people who were in the Administration, or who came to it later. But it is simply true, and anyone who was here in those days would confirm that.

Anyway, that was my start here, and so I came here with this kind of double sense. It was a valid picture of Wesleyan then, because Wesleyan was really on the cusp of becoming a very different place. It had its old prejudices, it had its old ways of doing things and thinking about things. But the people who were in charge knew that those things could be questioned, and might have to change. That’s too weak: might well have to change.

They had already decided to get engaged with minority admissions. And so far as the student body was concerned, they knew that their past history of quotas and ethnic and racial discrimination was wrong, and they had already decided to change
that. So for me, when I became involved with the Junior Faculty Organization, it was really a question of getting them to apply what they already believed, to their faculty as well as to the student body.

Smith: It seems so simplistic now, but at that time it was obviously complicated.

Slotkin: It was complicated and difficult and of course always involved. I'm speaking abstractly about it, but these ideas were embodied in persons and personalities who responded to the various crises in different kinds of ways.

Smith: What else did the Junior Faculty Organization engender?

Slotkin: This is sort of going ahead of things, but the JFO had always been concerned with the rights of the un-tenured. About the time that I came here, the junior faculty consisted of tenured and untenured faculty, because the Associate Professors did not participate in Academic Council or Advisory Committee, which meant that they played no role in personnel decisions. So we identified as a class with those who were excluded from personnel decision making powers.

I want to get the dates right, but what had happened in, I think, '67-'68, I wrote a letter to the JFO saying: Look, there's this history of Anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews in tenure. Here are the figures and facts that I've been able to gather, and-what are you going to do about it?

Typical for those days, they invited me, the new kid in town, to come talk with them about it. They said: Instead of writing this Polemic, why don't you help us put together a program for reform of tenure procedures, so that we can deal systematically with the problem. And over the course of the four years it took us to get it all done, we put together a set of tenure reform proposals. Most of which were ultimately accepted, and they included things like:

[1] All untenured faculty should participate in personnel decisions, so that the Associates join the full Professors in that role. So, if you're here as permanent faculty, you have a permanent interest in seeing how the faculty is staffed.

[2] Procedures to guarantee fairness. Departments have to solicit outside evaluations of scholarship. Scholarship has to be counted. In some departments it would be said that scholarly publication was “vulgar,” and pushy. It was not about that, it was about whether you fit in with your colleagues.
Smith: That was at Wesleyan?

Slotkin: That was at Wesleyan. The place was professionalizing like crazy at that point. They said: “Yeah, you want to be judged by your scholarship? Absolutely!” “Publish or perish? You’re in favor of it?” We said, “Yes! Give us a shot and make it possible for us to do it.”

[3] A counselor, to be chosen by the candidate, to be like a defense lawyer and to see that fairness is observed, and if questions arise about a candidate and his credentials which the candidate can answer, this person is the communications link between the faculty and the candidate.

And various other kinds of measures, so the point was accepted.

One of the key moments came from what we had put out in an early version of our proposal. In it, we mentioned the discrimination, and said that it was social promotion, on the basis of judgments made against people not on their credentials but on the basis of who they were and where they came from.

So we had this meeting: the JFO came in prepared to talk about the proposals, but all the Administration people wanted to talk about was the accusation of anti-Semitism. And they denied it. They said: It’s true that there’s been this pattern, but these people were let go because they were urban types and they wouldn’t have been happy here. At which point I said, “Well, shouldn’t they have been given the choice? I’m certainly an urban type, and I’m very happy here.”

You could see that they heard what this guy had said, and they recognized it as a reflection of the way in which they had actually operated. And they said: OK, let us consider your proposals, and we’ll get back to you. What they got back to us with was, essentially, “Yes, let’s gather, and talk about it and do something about this.”

This was of a piece with, and simultaneous with, the movement of Black students to establish Malcolm X house and to get various forms of African American studies into the curriculum. So they were used to this kind of rhetoric--and they recognized when it was coming from an unexpected quarter. They were now willing to apply it to the faculty in ways that they hadn’t before.

I think the idea before was, you bring in all these minority people and you introduce them to White Anglo-Saxon culture at its best. That’s what Wesleyan is about. They realized you’ve got to open up, and they did. To give them all due credit: they did.

Smith: I think that is one of the best things about the University. It has its traditions, but it isn't hidebound.
Slotkin: That’s right. You asked about the JFO, the other thing we got involved with was salaries. At that point, the salaries were completely controlled by the administration, and they were secret--even from Department Chairs. We believed that the rates were unfair and arbitrary. No one knew who got merit and why, or anything about it. At that time the PhD programs in science had just begun; we suspected that the scientists were being paid on a different scale from everyone else. And they were. In fact we discovered that there were Assistant Professors, newly fledged, in the sciences who were making more than full professors who had been here for many years in the Humanities. The response to this was: “Gentlemen don’t talk about money.” And I said, “We’re not gentlemen. We’re scholars, but we’re not gentlemen.”

We got the faculty together and what we did was, we told each other what we were earning as salaries. So we were able to construct a model of the salary scale and able to demonstrate the truth of our assertions. And we also asked people to authorize the Junior Faculty Organization to speak on their behalf to the administration. Then we had another one of these confrontations with Bob Rosenbaum--who was always the person you had to talk to about these things--and he challenged our figures and we laid our figures on the table and he challenged our right to speak for the junior faculty, and we laid the signed authorizations on the table. I think it was in June of 1969. There is a letter in the Archives of the Papers of the JFO in which Bob Rosenbaum states: “We agree on the establishment of a scale of salaries for Assistant Professors; we’ll talk about applying it to Associate Professors; and we agree to hold annual discussions with the representatives of the Junior Faculty Organization about how salaries will be set.” It was in effect a kind of informal negotiation.

Smith: It was also a kind of revolution.

Slotkin: Absolutely. It was the closest thing to a union that was possible in a place like this. And eventually what happened to that particular aspect of the JFO, was that it was subsumed by the AAUP Chapter, which included Full Professors as well as the untenured. And included professional librarians as well, actually.

That was the work of, I guess, my first ten years here. It started in my second year here, and actually the most basic shift had occurred before I got tenure. By 1972, the salary negotiations and the tenure reform had already been enacted.
Smith: But one of the results of all this involvement was that you got to know everybody and they all got to know you very early on.

Slotkin: Yeah. It was a little smaller when I started; only about 180 faculty. Yes, I became quite notorious.

Smith: Women were admitted shortly thereafter.


Smith: When you started, there were still roughly only 800 students, all male.

Slotkin: I think that’s right. Minority students were there. Getting back to the academic side, in my second year here, I put together, with some colleagues, a proposal to start an American Studies Program. David Swift and Jay Parsons really helped me do that. I put together a program that was modeled on the curriculum that I’d been through at Brown University. But modeled a little bit on the College of Letters format with introductory seminars and colloquia. But with a base in intellectual history.

So in order to get this thing under way--I’d just turned 24 at that point--we had to get the History Department to institute two courses that it didn’t have. They didn’t have a course in American Intellectual History. At that point Dick Buel got involved with it, and he became one of the teachers in that course. They let me teach a course in Intellectual History. Now I thought, of course you’ll let me teach it, I know it. But I later found out that the History Department was and is very picky about letting “non-historians” teach courses labelled History.

The EPC, Educational Policy Committee, accepted the proposal. If you think about it, that is a sign of the openness of the curriculum to new initiatives coming from wherever. I don’t remember the exact chronology, but I think it was the year after the Program was established, Don Meyer was hired, from I think UCLA. I couldn’t chair the program, I was a junior professor with no seniority. I couldn’t chair a program at that point, and he was brought in and chaired the program until I got tenure. That was how supportive Wesleyan was of that initiative.

The other thing that happened was, of course, we had African American students. A group of these students said, there is no African American literature in the curriculum. I believe Edgar Beckham had taught a course that included African American writers at some earlier point, but at that period he was not offering such a course--and he was actually moving into administration at that time. So the students
came to a group of us in the English Department and asked if we could offer a course. None of us of course specialized in African American literature, but we put together a group tutorial, and, through a very interesting and somewhat contentious semester, worked out how such a course could work and how it could be offered. I was able to get that into the curriculum the following year, with me teaching the course.

The other problem that we had in meeting the demands of Black students to offer more courses in their field, was no Black faculty other than Edgar Beckham. Who was not a specialist in African American studies. Recruiting Black faculty at that point was problematic, in part because there were some of the same prejudices, though they were voiced in a different way: We wouldn’t find top-notch faculty, they said, because competition for Black faculty was becoming serious. So, in part to tide things over, I started a program called the Teaching Apprenticeship for African American students. The plan was to bring them as teaching assistants into the course, so they could expand the range of teaching that was available to the students, by running tutorials and discussions groups and so on. This became the basis not of a general program, but the teaching apprenticeships lasted for many years here. I don’t think it still exists.

Individual students would work with a faculty member, and a group of students, to learn how to teach seminars. It was a very valuable experience for the students who did it.

One more thing: In 1968-69, the Center for Humanities was revamped, and faculty were given fellowships to work there. And were invited to teach experimental courses. I got one of the first fellowships, and I decided to try to teach a course in film. I’d always worked with American literature and popular literature, and it’s perfectly obvious that the movie is to the 20th Century what the novel was to the 19th Century. At that point Joe Reed introduced me to Jeanine Basinger, we became fast friends and colleagues and she started teaching me about film, and I started teaching film to students, and that was the beginning of an association that eventually led to the development of the Wesleyan Film Program.

Smith: I know my friend John Frazer was involved.

Slotkin: Yes, he was teaching a film course within the Art Department at that point.

Smith: When I came to Wesleyan in 1981, I was essentially told that I had arrived after its greatest and most glorious days: because all the excitement had happened in the ‘70s and earlier.
Slotkin: It was a different kind of excitement, I think. There were really interesting and important people here in those days, and they created really interesting programs. I feel that what came after is at least as interesting, and had an even greater effect on the curriculum. The study of mass culture wasn’t really done seriously here--or anywhere--before that, and now it is. Film is not only taught in Film, its taught in other departments as well. Almost every field in the Humanities has become Interdisciplinary. If you compare what is done now with what was being done back in the ‘60s, the work is at least as interesting as what came before, and institutionally has more permanent effect. In the old days they produced the College of Letters, and the College of Letters remains--the College of Letters, a very interesting Humanities interdisciplinary program. These newer programs taught now are of a more exciting character.

Smith: You were doing all of this innovating work, obviously not alone, but in concert with other people here, but at the same time you were beginning to write immense amounts of your own work, both fiction and scholarly. How did you manage to fit that all in?

Slotkin: I worked like a maniac.

My dissertation was the core of my first work, *Regeneration Through Violence*, which was my first big book, and that really made my reputation. I had the core of it done when I came here.

What can I say, I’m a writer, and I write well. When I know what I’m doing, I write quickly. At Wesleyan, while I was doing all this curricular and political stuff--and teaching, by the way, five courses, which is what the load was in those days, instead of four, which is what it is now. Summers were free, research support was available for summer work, I had a sabbatical in there as well, so the research support was good. I had time to write. When I was teaching and doing University politics, I did that intensely. And when I was not doing it, I was able to break away from it completely. And sit down and get the writing done.

Smith: My profession has been as an editor and hack writer, but to do original literary and scholarly writing is far more intensive and gut-wrenching.

Slotkin: It is. At least for me, starting a project can be very gut-wrenching. But again, once I feel I’ve got a structure in my head, and once I know what my voice is in the
piece I'm writing, I can write fluently. And I can write with a kind of demonic concentration, so that---well, a fire alarm once went off when I was working at home, and we were supposed to leave the house (it was just an overheated pipe), and I said "I'll be out in a minute." Of course, 3 hours later I hadn't moved. I can do that, which is what enabled me to get that work done.

Smith: I'm going to slide back a little bit. You have been associated with Wesleyan during the tenures of six different Presidents, I think--did you go up to Mr. Roth?

Slotkin: Oh, yes, we coincided for my last year.

Smith: You started with Mr. Butterfield, then Mr. Etherington, then Colin Campbell, followed by Mr. Chace, Mr. Bennet, and now Mr. Roth. Did you sense there was a difference in management in each?

Slotkin: Oh God, yes. Let's see: Butterfield was a quirky, cranky, brilliant dictator, who made my hair stand on end. And I was very lucky that he retired after my first year here, because I don't think he would have been receptive to initiatives from below. He never had been in the past, to things that challenged the power of the Presidency and his ability to control just about everything including faculty appointments. So there would have been blood on the floor there.

Etherington--he opened up the place He was the man of openness. He invited the SEPP Reports, I forget what the acronym stands for, but the idea was let a thousand flowers bloom, inviting all kinds of proposals, on curriculum, organization, and so on.

Smith: And the University was rich at that point.

Slotkin: And the University was indeed rich at that point. Although it was misspending its money. It was building buildings out of capital instead of financing them, and my own sense of Etherington was that, after the first year, he had his eye on the Senate and he was not seriously interested in managing anything. That worked for us, in a way, because he wouldn't resist, he wanted to damp down any controversy that occurred. So, again, willingness to compromise on his part.
Colin had the longest tenure, and I had the greatest respect for Colin. We disagreed on a couple of really critical issues, but he was always willing to talk, he was always reasonable, and as a manager of the academic side of things, even though he wasn’t an academic, he supported strength. If you came to him with a strong proposal and you represented a strong program or a good intellectual initiative, he backed you. And he backed you with money.

At one point I had an offer from the University of Chicago; I was an Associate Professor, and it was for a Full Professorship. At that point what one did was to say, “I might stay if you promote me, and match the salary, but I said, “I want more than that. I have some ideas for expanding American Studies and developing the film side; I want money to support a series of visiting observers and scholars to make presentations and advise us on which way we should go; and I want Jeanine Basinger’s position to be regularized in some way, so that we can have her value be here permanently. He said: “These are all good ideas. You’re thinking of the institution, not just of yourself, absolutely we’ll back you on this.” I respected Colin and got along with him, and felt that on the academic side he was very good. The financial side is not my area of expertise.

Chace came in with a mandate to cut, to reduce. He largely fulfilled that, but I didn’t have much respect for his intellect or his manners or his understanding of anything that mattered about the institution. JoAnn Creighton was his Vice President for Academic Affairs. She was good. And the people he brought in for fundraising were no good. I worked on a committee which was called IPAC, I think it was Institutional Priorities-- and Something. so I worked hard on trying to make the thing work. Bill Barber was on that Committee as well, and we really were at several points just throwing up our hands at the way things were moving. It was pretty bad.

Chace, when he introduced himself to the Faculty, had made a speech, with Colin sitting right there, saying that “the days of the Little University” were over. We were going to become something different. Well, what did that mean? We were going to stop doing research? Going to stop having research support? Was he saying We’re going to up the teaching load?

I did a parody of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* in which a professor at Wesleyan goes to sleep as a Professor at a university and wakes up as a college teacher, and he’s lying on his back helplessly waving his hands because he has no more sabbaticals. This apparently was a big hit and Chace mentioned it at a meeting; he said that whoever had written it had obviously misinterpreted Kafka.
Smith: He was an odd aberration, and my sense was that he came here and realized quickly that he had made a mistake.

Slotkin: His career at Emory was troubled. He was featured in an interview on “60 Minutes” because he’d tried to do in an Economics Professor. And he had nothing to say for himself, because it was just a case of personal viciousness.

Smith: But he still did far better at Emory than he had at Wesleyan.

Slotkin: Oh, yeah. They liked his management style, and they had a better financial situation than we did when he came in.

Smith: I went to listen to him teach because I was writing a profile about him for the magazine, and I thought he was an excellent teacher. He’s the only person anyone ever really speaks negatively about.

Slotkin: Deservedly so. He really was not a nice person. Let’s see. Bennet. Bennet didn’t really care about the academic side at all. You got no sense that he was interested. He was an enigma to me. He really let Judith Brown handle everything. We referred to her privately as “Dr. No.” When she came in, the Film Program had just acquired Departmental status, after years of struggle to get that established--and with very hard work, with outside committees, and outside evaluators, and research into the national state of Film Studies across the country. We really put in a good six years of work. And her first response was, “Well, if I’d been VPAA, I would never have approved this.” So it was a good thing she wasn’t VPAA then; I mean she was again trying to discipline the faculty by being essentially unresponsive.

Smith: I had left before she arrived, so I have no visual image of her. I had interviewed Doug Bennet a few years before, when he was President of National Public Radio--and that was a lot of fun.

Slotkin: Yet he just never connected here. I never met anyone who felt that he had an eye out for their programs, or understood what they were really about. He just left it to Judith.
Smith: And then Mr. Roth.

Slotkin: We just coincided for one year, but he is an alumnum--

Smith: So was Bennet.

Slotkin: But Roth is an alumnum of the Wesleyan that I know, so he is more in tune with the institution I grew to know. He cares about the academic side to a greater extent than any president I've known, and is more knowledgable about it. Colin had good instincts, but it wasn't second nature to him. This is really Roth's milieu.

Smith: And he's still here, and nobody's is agitating for him to go.

Slotkin: No, no. And these are not easy times to be in charge.

Smith: They've stopped “need blind” admissions, which is a significant step.

Slotkin: It's extremely difficult, and I'm sure other changes are coming as well. He's inherited a set of conditions that are just awful. But he's managed to keep innovation going. I'm really out of touch with the state of faculty morale and day to day doings and so on.

Smith: What are you doing now?

Slotkin: Whatever I like!

We have been traveling, not so much in the last couple of years, but I've done a lot of writing on my own time, so that's really what I've had more time for.

Smith: How did you focus in on the American West and the Civil War--with American Studies, you had a lot of centuries to cover there.

Slotkin: Well, one of the things I really liked about American Studies--and about doing American Studies at Wesleyan--was that I wasn't stuck in one period. At the beginning I had to do all periods because we didn't have enough faculty to cover all periods, but that suited me fine. I wanted to do the whole thing.
And the thing about American Studies is, it’s not like England, this history doesn’t go back that far, so it’s possible to master the whole arc of cultural development, or at least significant fragments at each stage of the arc. So I started technically as an Early American specialist, and in the very first year I taught Early American, I taught the Modernists, called American Literature between the World Wars, and Intellectual History from the Colonial Period to the Civil War, no--excuse me, I did Civil War to the New Deal, which was technically outside my area of expertise. And within two years I was teaching Film.

Coming out of my background, in New York, in Brooklyn, I was born during the Second World War, and the atmosphere in New York was intense left liberal patriotism. Being an American, trying to understand what it meant being an American as a third generation from immigration. My grandfather on my father’s side was an immigrant. My wife’s father was an immigrant, came in after the Russian Revolution. Being an American and understanding what being an American meant was very important to me from a very early point.

1951, my family drove south from Brooklyn to visit relatives in Miami Beach. We drove and stopped at Gettysburg. Lincoln had always been a kind of icon, but there was wonderful confusion in my mind, in which Lincoln and FDR somehow morphed into each other. Very difficult to explain that: wartime presidents, liberators, who died before they could complete their work.

There was a wonderful piece of music called *Lonesome Train*. It was a Cantata about Lincoln’s funeral, by Earl Robinson and Millard Lampel (I think), that we played that was very moving to me. The trains...and my father had served in the war, and I’d gone out to Texas on a train to visit him during the war, so it was evocative for me.

Anyway, we went to Gettysburg, and I realized the Civil War is IT, the Civil War is where it all comes from, the Civil War is about freedom, the Civil War is about racial equality, the Civil War is about America open to all kinds rather than closed to anyone who is not white AngloSaxon Protestant. And Lincoln is the symbol of all that.

And then we went from Gettysburg, in one day, to Virginia, which was segregated. And at Luray Caverns Park, I went into the Colored bathroom. Not as an act of defiance, but in simple ignorance. What the hell is “Colored” and “White”? Is it a statement about the decor? I wasn’t looking Colored/White, I was looking “Men/Women.” And there was a Black man in there who screamed at me: “Get out of here!”

For fear--white boy in Black bathroom.
I went out, and the white woman behind the reception desk said nastily, “You people think you can come down here and do anything you please.” I was humiliated, to be treated that way in public, and I was bewildered, and I asked my parents to explain to me “what is going on here?”

They explained Segregation to me, which did not make any sense. How do you go from the Gettysburg Address, freeing the slaves, to white and colored bathrooms and Black people can’t vote? That trip to the south was just a mind-bender, and it set me on a life-long mission to figure out how a country that produces Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address and the Emancipation Proclamation, and FDR, can also produce Segregation and Senator Bilbo, George Wallace, and all of that nonsense.

And basically that has been my work every since. The conundrum of race and violence.

Now the Western part of it is: I was raised on Cowboy movies. Basically, if you ask me what American History is, I’m not thinking Plymouth Rock, I’m thinking “Red River,” I’m thinking cattle drive, I’m thinking Cowboys and Indians. And the beauty of American Studies was that I could take that seriously, and say yeah, I’m not the only one who grew up thinking that the Western is the essence of American History.

In graduate school I took a course in Colonial Literature. We were given a set of documents divided into genres. Among the genres were: “The Artillery Sermon,” “The Indian War Narrative,” and “The Captivity Narrative.” What I realized was that these genres of Colonial writing--because each one had particular formula that it followed--was a specific narrative. The Captivity Narrative is a story about a white woman captured by Indians, and somehow rescued by God or man; and the Indian War Narrative is a tale of the white man who goes into the wilderness to learn from the Indians but also to fight the Indians. And I said: "My god, John Wayne, ‘Red River,’ ‘The Searchers,’ all goes back to 1675.” And it has been simply a question for the rest of my life of figuring out how you get from Mary Rowlandson and Benjamin Church in 1675 to John Wayne and “The Searchers” in 1956.

Matter of filling in the blanks.

Smith: We’ve covered quite a lot of territory. Is there anything else that you’d like to talk about?

Slotkin: Let’s talk about students.
You asked how I was able to get so much writing done while being heavily involved in teaching and the University curriculum. I think the answer to that is in part the quality of the students.

There’s a kind of synergy. The courses I was teaching were related to the work that I was doing, the writing I was doing. Related in a kind of general way, so that what I was teaching in my courses was to provide students with an historical, literary background, that was also essential to the higher work that I was doing.

In order to do that, you have to take your most sophisticated ideas and re-frame them in terms that an intelligent and willing undergraduate can understand. And the thing about Wesleyan students is that they are not only intelligent, they are also open and willing and eager to learn. The intellectual intensity of the Wesleyan student body is remarkable. Visiting faculty that we’ve had all through the years have always remarked that this is kind of astonishing.

It’s not a question of being a grind or anything else, it’s a matter of being capable of intellectual excitement. So that the feedback I thought I got was always good feedback, always interesting, useful feedback. And not uncritical feedback: if I was saying something that made no sense, you knew it. These students, whose faces otherwise would otherwise light up, would say “I don’t get it.” So you reframe it, and I think that helped my writing. Helped keep me free of jargon, and if I used a technical term, to explain it in ways that were both comprehensible and also memorable, so you didn’t forget the meaning of a technical term when it crops up three chapters later.

That’s the effect of teaching the kind of undergraduates that we have here.

Smith: I did attend some classes here, but mostly my contact with students was with those who worked in our office. I liked their innovation, and liveliness. One great thing about the student body here is that they are very mixed, not only culturally, but economically.

Slotkin: Yes, but the loss of need blind is going to hurt that, I’m afraid.

I remember vividly from the early days here that it was hard to establish---for example among minority students, and later to a certain extent for the women as well---to establish themselves in such a way that they actually felt at home here. Because the place was in transition, from having been what some had called “potted Ivy,” to being this kind of cosmopolitan Little University, and in all kinds of ways in which the folk ways were deeply unfamiliar.
In the early days, Wesleyan had a very close connection with a school called Harlem Prep, and they were taking in students who were considered academically risky to a much greater extent than we do now. There were real cultural difficulties to be gotten through, and there were things like fights in the dorms, and outbursts of anger, that needed to be worked through and talked through. There was a process of mutual adjustment that went on, that was very difficult. It didn’t just become what it is overnight; it was a long process.

At every point, the openness to change made it possible to talk about things as one human being to another. We never got into confrontations such as occurred at bigger places, like Cornell, or Stanford, where things got really ugly. We were always able to keep things down at a human level.

Smith: That was of course before I was on campus. Later, when there was a fire-bombing of the President’s office---

Slotkin: Oh, yeah; we had stuff like that, too.

Smith: I recall hearing about the Admissions Director of that time, Jack Hoy, whom I met much later. This entire process was his mission, not alone, of course, but he was very much the right man in the right spot for that time

Slotkin: Right. but it took time to build the kind of support structures that the admissions process required. Doing more work in Orientation, for example. Some of the students I had didn’t know, when you’re writing a paper in which you quote things, how much you are able to quote and how much has to be your own words--just very basic stuff. Originally, that wasn’t the kind of support that was required, and that had to be expanded. My wife tells a story about that: There was always a person who was known as The Black Dean, at that point, I think his name was Frank Stuart. His wife was Diane. Iris, my wife, was walking across the campus, and she saw Diane at a distance and she waved, but they missed each other. When she met Diane later, she said, “Diane, I thought I saw you walking across the campus the other day,” And Diane said, “If you thought you saw me, you saw me.”

There had to be a kind of critical mass established to give the community a kind of solidity and presence. And then, gradually, there was a build-up and backlog of Black alums so there was a tradition in the place, but that took a long time. I would say it
wasn’t really in place until I’d been here about twelve years or so. I wasn’t here at the beginning of the big minority admissions program, so it was longer than that.

Smith: When I came in ’81 it wasn’t an Admissions operation any more, the issue was a recurrence of the Black Power activities of some years before. There was a sort of second wave of external influences.

Slotkin: Yes. Yes. Once you’ve established a community, there are all kinds of differences that can arise. But the first group that arrived--when they offered demands, they felt they had to be more militant than they actually were, because they weren’t sure they’d be listened to. And when they were being listened to, they didn’t recognize that that’s what was going on, because the manners were not what they were used to. They were not getting the kind of immediate feedback that they expected. It was the usual University committee culture response: “Well, we’ll take that under consideration,” and “We’ll consider it,” and “We’ll get back to you as soon as we can scratch out of other stuff we are doing.” They felt their sense of urgency was not shared, that there was definitely a mis-communication.

That didn’t happen later on. Their sense of urgency was shared. People did understand what was at state in these issues, and although there was contentiousness, there wasn’t the same level of mis-comprehension that I remember from the earliest days.

Smith: Did you ever talk to people on other campuses and learn what was going on there?

Slotkin: Oh, sure. Various places, where there were similar sorts of things occurring. On big campuses, where there was a larger minority representation, it did tend to be more polarized, and polarized sooner. And to become more militantly polarized. And in some places there was just plain resistance to the whole thing. Brown was very slow to get on board with that.

The other thing is, African-American faculty: There were many more, and many more important Black faculty members at Brooklyn College; there was nobody here except for Ed Beckham. And he was an alum. It was almost as if Wesleyan didn’t trust any Black people that it hadn’t trained. The hiring of Black faculty was a strain, and required the politicking that was required to get it going in a systematic way. It was a
question not simply of hiring--- You see, Wesleyan’s notion of hiring is: “We sit back and you apply.” And at this point we needed to recruit.

They knew that with Black students. They knew that they had to go out and recruit Black students. First of all, before Affirmative Action, going out to Black high schools and saying: “You can send your students to Wesleyan,” that was a recruiting action. And once Affirmative Action kicked in, you had to recruit students to compete with other institutions.

Again, they had to use the tactic they’d learned with recruiting Black students, and apply it to Black faculty. You have to go out and do a search for an Assistant Professor, of the kind you would have done if you were looking for a brand new Full Professor of Chemistry to chair your new PhD program. It took persuading to get that done.

Smith: Do you think they ultimately succeeded?

Slotkin: Oh, I do! I think they missed several opportunities early on to really build a strong Black faculty component, because we had such a strong minority student element. If some departments hadn’t been resistant to the initiative--- They said, “We’re not going to take this into consideration. We’re looking for people with certain specialities and not other specialities.” We could have done better. And now it becomes extremely difficult because you are competing with Harvard and Yale and Stanford.

Smith: Though there have been Black deans at the college. I expect it is more difficult with academics.

Slotkin: Yes, it is more difficult. And you have to worry-- the different departments have different priorities. An Affirmative Action appointment may not be the best candidate for a particular department--may not suit X Department’s need for a specialist in a particular field. When Wesleyan was flush with cash, you could add an extra position to the table of organization. But when you take that option away, it becomes very difficult. I should say also, and this is way off base here, but once your ability to compete for new faculty diminishes, your ability to retain your existing minority faculty diminishes. They get offers from elsewhere.

Smith: Have we accomplished enough for today?
Slotkin: Certainly enough for today.

[Interview concluded.]