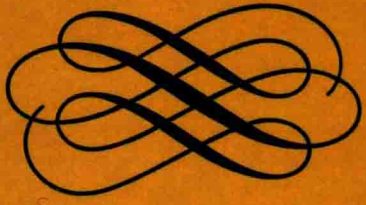
Studying the Dead

THE GRATEFUL DEAD SCHOLARS CAUCUS



AN INFORMAL HISTORY

Edited by

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The Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus, An Informal History

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For Alan Trist and Dennis McNally,
for supporting Dead studies and showing the way,
and for the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus,
for their commitment, creativity, and collegiality

Foreword

Steven Gimbel

The bohemian occupies a conflicted place in the academy because we find ourselves vulnerable to an equivocation upon the notion of pleasure. On the one hand, like the Fool in *King Lear*, there is thought to be wisdom in a certain sort of levity. Living a life that mocks the banal preoccupations of those trapped by the structures of power and wealth, especially now with the rise of modernity, is seen as displaying an inner strength and far-sightedness. Those who set themselves apart from the commonplace lives of quiet desperation, casting a cynical eye upon those chained to the mediocrity forced upon them by their social context, are celebrated, seen like Plato's philosopher emerging from the cave. Like Nietzsche, we celebrate the bohemian for restoring us to our true nature as revealed in our more animal, bacchanalian selves. Their revelry is a reclamation, simultaneously destructive and synthetic, creating a new, more humane existence.

But the history of Western culture is built upon the duality of mind and body, radically distinguishing between the spiritual and the material, the high and the low, the true and the relative, the profound and the mundane, the sacred and the profane. The bodily, as philosophers refer to this collective, is denigrated. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle calls the pursuit of pleasure a life for cattle. John Stuart Mill, in his ethical pamphlet *Utilitarianism*, compares those who pursue the bodily with swine. In this way, the bohemian is identified with the unserious. Levity is the antithesis of gravity and it is the weak and corrupted character that becomes enchanted with the superfluous.

The schizophrenic way we view the bohemian is manifested in the way we select which outsiders are invited into the canon, which radicals are rebranded revolutionaries, which challenges and revisions are ultimately deemed to be progress. Some barbarians simply break down the gates. Albert Einstein wrote his seminal paper introducing the special theory of relativity,

"On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," in 1905 without a PhD, without an academic appointment, and without the proper sponsorship within the community. For such an impudent young man to challenge the venerable Newton with a radical revision of the notion of time was not merely audacious, it was taken as proof of his irrelevance, that he was merely a crank. When the great French polymath Henri Poincaré wrote about relativity before 1910, he attributed it solely to the respectable Dutch scientist H. A. Lorentz, completely ignoring the upstart Einstein. But after Arthur Eddington's observations of a solar eclipse in 1919 provided empirical support for Einstein's relativistic theory of gravitation, there was no choice but to place him upon his deserved pedestal. His unkempt hair, his eschewing of belts and socks, his baggy trousers and sweaters became endearing eccentricities.

But what of the radical who does not revolutionize his field, but only redirects it? Einstein ceased to be dangerous because in his wake to be a physicist required being an Einsteinian physicist. But the more usual role of the bohemian is as critic. When the critique is apt, this not only fails to endear the bohemian to his audience, but reinforces his status as treacherous, as someone who seeks to undermine that which is core to our cultural essence. He is an unrepentant nihilist who threatens our intellectual security.

Such figures often require a cooling-off period before they can be brought into the canon. Voltaire and Oscar Wilde could be embraced by even the most conservative members of the academy once the elements of the cultures they so vehemently attacked ceased to be central to those cultures. When the objects of their scorn faded from view, when the cultural nerves they touched died, their work could be emotionally divorced from the tumult of the cultural divides of their times.

This effect may also be noted in the mature careers of a number of American bohemians. The older Truman Capote, Ken Kesey, and Allen Ginsberg ceased to be threatening, and therefore could be welcomed into the ranks of great notable contemporary writers without raising suspicion. They were no longer sinister. Their earlier works could claim their rightful place because, in their older manifestations, their authors had become cute.

One would expect to find the Grateful Dead in this category. With the fading memory of the Cold War, America may have finally finished fighting Vietnam. While the website Craigslist may be the most recent incarnation of the Haight-Ashbury Diggers' Free Store, it does not endanger commercialism. Despite their well-recognized, three-decade-long role as ambassadors to refugees seeking asylum in Upper Psychedelia, the Grateful Dead are no longer live ammunition in the Culture Wars. "Touch of Grey" plays in shopping malls and "Shakedown Street" can be heard between innings at ballgames. The band may have been the last vestige of the Haight-Ashbury scene that birthed them, but in this, they have become caricatured as quaint, if not

campy, Americana; not so much reminders of days gone past, but mere icons, one-dimensional cartoonish representations of them (Meriwether).

This is not to say that they were not revolutionary. From their aesthetic challenge to three-and-a-half-minute, hook-based, radio-friendly popular music to the decentralized corporate structure of their organization, from their ideas concerning intellectual property that anticipated contemporary debates to their fluid notions of consciousness, the Grateful Dead and the culture that grew up around them defied norms across a broad swath of the cultural and intellectual landscape. Yet serious scholarship about this community—this largely self-contained and fixed feature of American society—is extremely limited. The Grateful Dead phenomenon still can be dismissively waved off as just a bunch of dirty, dope-smoking hippies.

This is not unexpected. When a group is designated as outsiders, being taken seriously is difficult. As Robert K. Merton argues,

> As the society becomes polarized, so do the contending claims of truth. At the extreme, an active and reciprocal distrust between groups finds expression in intellectual perspectives that are no longer located within the same universe of discourse. The more deep-seated the mutual distrust, the more does the argument of the other appear so palpably implausible, even absurd, that one no longer inquires into substance or logical structure to assess its truth claims. Instead, one confronts the other's arguments with an entirely different question: how does it happen to be advanced at all? Thought therefore becomes altogether functionalized, interpreted only in terms of its presumed social or economic or psychological sources and functions. In the political arena, where the rules of the game often condone and sometimes support the practice, this involves reciprocated attacks on the integrity of the opponent; in the academic forum, where the norms are somewhat more restraining, it leads to reciprocated ideological analyses (which easily decline into innuendo). In both, the process feeds upon and nourishes collective insecurities. (9)

Scholarly consideration of the Grateful Dead and the Haight has, in this way, been confined to an alternate universe of discourse.

Establishing this as a legitimate and respected field of inquiry requires addressing the collective insecurity. This can be done in one of two ways, both clearly seen through Thomas Kuhn's notion of paradigm as an operational worldview complete with accepted strategies and rules for research. The first means is to overthrow the reigning paradigm in an intellectual revolution. As John Maynard Keynes famously remarked of the advancement of his new approach to macroeconomics, "We make progress one funeral at a time." Revolutions often take generations to accomplish.

Alternatively, one could show that this seeming anomaly can be addressed within the structure of the dominant paradigm. This is precisely what this volume does. Employing traditional tools of the historian in a recognizable and rigorous fashion, Nicholas Meriwether is the leader of a group of

academics who want to take the three-decade-long cultural phenomenon that was the Grateful Dead and understand its origin in and ramifications on the larger currents of American society. The attempt is not to change the way things are done, but simply to recognize the legitimate place of that time and those people in the narrative that is the American story.

The antipathy toward the counterculture has wrongly colored what so many took to be transcendental group experiences. Like the traveling evangelical tent revivals of the nineteenth century, these gatherings had lasting effects. Some of the participants in the movement went on to great achievements in the arts, sciences, letters, and technology. The ability to attract tens of thousands across generations says something important about the function that Dead shows played in the second half of the twentieth century. With their well-developed norms and rituals, and linguistic conventions of its own, this culture-within-a-culture has much to tell us.

Fortunately we have Nicholas Meriwether, whose work as researcher, editor, and advocate frames that discussion in the most meticulous fashion. Meriwether's writings on the Grateful Dead experience have appeared in a wide range of popular publications, but it is his work as the editor of so many of his peers' writings, along with his stewardship of a growing and regularly meeting interdisciplinary community of scholars described here, that provides the intellectual infrastructure for future scholarly development. And it is his carefully crafted scholarship and scholarly editing that shows most clearly that these bohemians, the Grateful Dead and the Deadhead culture writ large, are legitimate and important topics of research.

Academics may harbor ambiguous feelings toward bohemians in general, but if this volume does nothing else, it should be a major step to allowing these particular bohemians to settle into their rightful place as a proper topic for scholarly inquiry.

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Preface

Writing recent history is dangerous. Hunter S. Thompson warned of the journalistic equivalent in the introduction to his biting, satiric tour-de-force of political journalism, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*: "When a jackrabbit gets addicted to road-running, it is only a matter of time before he gets smashed—and when a journalist turns into a politics junkie, he will sooner or later start raving and babbling in print about things that only a person who has Been There can possibly understand" (*Fear and Loathing* 17). Talking only to insiders is also one of the perils of writing recent history, one to add to those that historians Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano list in their recent book, but as they also point out, "the methodological challenges involved in doing recent history are matched by the rewards: exploring untouched archives, establishing new fields and topics, and having an intellectual platform from which to speak about history as it happens are but a few" (*Doing Recent History* 5). Grateful Dead studies illustrates their assertion handily, as this book argues. Even more, the scholarly community that has arisen around the challenge of studying the Dead phenomenon is itself a worthy topic for recent history. Though one that certainly has its fair share of both perils and pleasures, it is a topic that also helps unknot the already intriguing and complex relations between the disparate voices and views that have addressed the Grateful Dead from such a wide range of disciplinary perspectives.

The larger history of the scholarly work on the Grateful Dead has been traced elsewhere (Meriwether, "Introduction: All Graceful Instruments"; "The Thousand Stories"; Dollar). This book adds to that literature by focusing on the group of scholars that has contributed the most to that discourse. It complements the recently issued *Reading the Grateful Dead: A Critical Survey* (Scarecrow Press, 2012). That volume collected material from nine vol-

umes of periodicals and conference programs that primarily documented the work of the Grateful Dead area of the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Association. Nicknamed the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus, that conference area is the subject of this volume. Like *Reading the Grateful Dead*, this book makes available a number of additional essays gathered from those ephemeral and extremely limited publications in a textually definitive and consistent form, indicated in the credits. All have been revised, though I have resisted the temptation to amend with the hindsight of history (however recent), so as to preserve their value as largely contemporaneous documents, especially the conference reports in part II.

Unlike other scholarly anthologies of Grateful Dead studies, this book focuses on the discourse community (a term used here in its most general sense) that has spearheaded the scholarly conversation.[1] That conversation begins in an oral, aural setting: the conference meetings. Too often, that genesis disappears from the record in the academy's focus on print, and for a young discourse that already shows resiliency and ambition, documenting that foundation seems warranted. Scholars interested in the discourse of Dead studies are the principal audience for this book: Here they will find checklists and abstracts describing a wide range of work on the Grateful Dead phenomenon, documented in part II, with an eye toward what makes that work unique, compelling, and evocative, as expressed by the conference papers comprising part I. Readers interested in the ways that discourse communities involving multiple disciplines function may also find this volume instructive. While not intended as a primer on how to foster a discourse, or build a conference section, the book can be read as a case study of one such effort, an answer to what pioneering interdisciplinary theorist Julie Klein called for nearly a decade ago when she warned her colleagues against the "tendency to hover at the level of theory with little or no attention to what is happening on the ground of practice" (*Humanities, Culture, and Interdisciplinarity* 7). Scholars interested in the challenges of interdisciplinarity may find the ways that the Caucus has approached its work to be more broadly illuminating as well. That theme runs through many of the chapters here, with the conclusion offering a number of thoughts for what that means explicitly.

As the editor of the volumes that first published many of the chapters here, assembling this book was a logical extension of the mandate I assumed when I became area chair of the Caucus. My work as Grateful Dead archivist at the University of California–Santa Cruz includes stewarding the scholarly use of the band's archive, but it includes more than a dozen associated collections as well, one of which is devoted to the Caucus. That collection is a constant presence here, as are oral histories with four former area chairs. My own experience plays a role in this narrative as well. My first appearance at the Caucus, then unnamed, was in 1999, and I attended ten of the fifteen

meetings documented here, serving as area chair or cochair for seven of those years. Like many participants, I found the group dynamics and conversation to be refreshingly free of the hierarchy and territoriality that often attends academic discourse, yet still characterized by a deep sense of rigor and commitment. And, of course, I believed in the goal of the discourse: the understanding of the Grateful Dead phenomenon, in all of its myriad manifestations and aspects. This book reflects that belief.

If writing recent history is dangerous, then autobiography complicates that even more. My approach has been to focus on the best qualities of the Caucus and its conversation, ones that the group would tend to agree express its ideals, while acknowledging the inevitable tensions and clashes that accompany academic, and human, convocations—especially those that involve many theoretical perspectives. Young fields—and fledgling discourse communities—need friends, so if I have erred on the side of generosity, I trust my partisanry will be seen as appropriately protective. My approach here is not as a historian but as an archivist and sometime participant-observer: I am a steward of that conversation and its record, not an objective critic.

All books signify obligation, and one depicting a community and a conversation represents an unusual degree of that indebtedness. First and foremost, then, my thanks to the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus, a group who has made the Grateful Dead area of the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Association conferences such a remarkable and welcoming forum to explore the meaning and significance of the Grateful Dead phenomenon for more than fifteen years. I hope this informal history serves as a useful record of the work of the Caucus and an accurate reflection of its spirit. Former Caucus area chairs Rob Weiner, Barry Barnes, and Stan Spector all read chapters of the manuscript, as did Sue Balter-Reitz, who was especially helpful in framing my thoughts on discourse analysis; I thank them for their insights, which made this a better book.

My other debts are no less multifarious. Scholars working in recent history tread carefully, and my faltering steps have been encouraged by many colleagues and friends. David Lemieux, the Grateful Dead's legacy manager and vault archivist, is a friend I always call "the real Grateful Dead archivist," and the person responsible for the remarkable historic recordings that continue to document the most important part of the Grateful Dead phenomenon, the music. Mark Pinkus, vice president of Rhino Records, handles the band's trademarks and oversees their ongoing archival release program; he is both a friend and a vital ally and patron of Dead studies in the finest sense of the word. Alan Trist, longtime manager of Ice Nine Publishing, the band's music publisher, and Dennis McNally, former band publicist and official historian, have been gracious and supportive in ways too numerous to recount. Their own writing, and their stewardship of the scholarly conversation on the band and phenomenon, are inspirations to all scholars studying the

Grateful Dead phenomenon. Stephen Ryan of Scarecrow Press supported this book during a difficult gestation; his faith (and patience) in an unusual project was more than instrumental. My thinking about the Dead has benefited from my work as Grateful Dead archivist at the University of California–Santa Cruz; I am grateful to my colleagues at McHenry Library for their support, especially Greg Careaga, who took the time to read and comment on several chapters. David Moltke-Hansen has been a colleague and inspiration in more ways than he knows; I thank him for reading and commenting on parts of the manuscript as well. Most of all, Laura McClanathan's assistance and support throughout this project—especially on the index, which is her work—were constant reminders of the collegiality and caritas that were the soul of the Deadhead experience, and that continue to define the work of the Caucus.

NOTE

1. I am using the term *discourse community* in the general sense specified by John Swales and refined by John Porter. The literature on discourse communities is extensive, and I recognize that competing definitions exist; for more on discourse communities, see the conclusion.

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Contents

Introduction

"If My Words Did Glow": Discoursing the Grateful Dead

In 1987, an interviewer asked Jerry Garcia, "What do you think of the idea of scholarship and arts & letters in rock and roll?" His response was revealing: "I think there's a place for it. It's one of those things where it's hard for me to take my own work too seriously, because I know it's just me [laughs]; but on the other hand everything that I like, I like to know about" (Jackson 43). In another interview that same year, he was more direct: "If there are people who find enough cultural furniture in the Grateful Dead outback, that's great with me. It's where I live" (Vaughan 76). Still, even Garcia might have been surprised by how many scholars have been studying the cultural furniture in the Grateful Dead outback. In the eighteen years since Garcia's death in 1995, the amount and range of the scholarship on the Grateful Dead has grown into a respectable bibliography, supported by a thriving discourse community, nicknamed the Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus. This book contributes to that bibliography by looking at that discourse community and the scholarly conversation it has spearheaded for the last fifteen years.

Why study the Grateful Dead? The steady proliferation of scholarly articles, chapters, theses, and anthologies devoted to the subject is itself an answer to the question, but the polyphony of those voices, and the diversity of their perspectives, rephrase it just as often. And as the discourse continues, so, too, do the answers multiply, both implied and stated. This book traces some of those answers, exploring a few of the explicit and exhuming a number of the implied, but it does so by focusing on the ways that scholars have approached the Grateful Dead phenomenon. By looking at the discourse community that has fostered the scholarly conversation of Dead studies, this

book asks, how do we study the Grateful Dead? The essays, conference reports, checklists, and abstracts assembled here document the way that one discourse community has created an unusual and successful interdisciplinary conversation, one that has made substantial contributions to the scholarly understanding of its subject, and in so doing, created an intriguing model for how such a conversation can be built, something that interdisciplinary theorists have long called for (Krohn 31; Klein, *Interdisciplinarity* 195; Strober 3). The implications of what that study means for the scholarly conversation of Dead studies, for the discourse community that fosters it, and for the academy as a whole, are all issues broached by the essays here, but this book shies away from making definitive pronouncements, as befits a topic of recent history—one that is still unfolding, in fact. This is why this volume represents a hybrid of a traditional scholarly anthology, represented by part I, along with a brief survey of the group's history and reports of each meeting with checklists or abstracts, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. It makes for an unusual book, but that is appropriate for a snapshot of an ongoing inquiry, dynamic and evolving.

That inquiry began with its subject. Almost from the band's inception, the Dead and their milieu attracted scholarly attention (Meriwether, "Introduction: All Graceful Instruments"). That should not surprise, however, for as band historian and longtime publicist Dennis McNally reminds us, the academy and the world of the Grateful Dead "are not so far apart as we might first think, that in fact there is a very solid bridge between them, spanning the gap and uniting both worlds" ("The Grateful Dead in the Academy" 5). McNally writes with authority, with a doctorate in history whose dissertation became a best-selling biography of Jack Kerouac; but as Steven Gimbel notes in the foreword to this book, the academy is chary of welcoming bohemians into its ivory tower, or their works into the canon.

Part of the Grateful Dead's image problem is their association with the Haight-Ashbury and the counterculture of the 1960s, a cultural moment that they embraced and, in the eyes of many commentators, embodied (Zimmerman 98). Not surprisingly, the counterculture's rejection of the mainstream produced a reciprocal reaction, one that continues to complicate the study of the 1960s today. That process and its eventual reversal can be found in many fields, from art to literature to even science, but it is especially clear in the case of musical genres. As one musicologist explained in 1969, writing in defense of jazz:

> The alien element, I suspect, can scarcely be overestimated. Exoticism is all very well, even attractive, in the music of India, Indonesia, China or Japan. But it is something else again when it flourishes within one's own society. What Robert Ardrey has termed so felicitously the 'territorial imperative' comes into play. The reaction of those who feel challenged is to close ranks and expel the