Afterword

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Like a lone straggler limping up the street after the crowd has come and gone, this afterword looks up and wonders what could possibly remain to say after all the fireworks are over. Nothing, perhaps, other than to offer a small comment on the shape of the multitude as it recedes into the distance. As the editors observe, by design and intention this is a very crowded book. Although each essay has its singular voice, the effect of reading from essay to essay is much like lingering over faces in a crowd, each distinctive and yet in their cumulative effect composing a mass. Set against this mass are the alphabetized “crystals,” sparkling gems of wit that give a pleasurable jolt of surprise, like the few individuals who are given red kerchiefs to make them stand out from the multitude. Embroidering the borders are the semantic histories and personal reminiscences, positioned on the outskirts yet with clear affinities to the center of the mass.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the project’s form, to my mind, is its distributed existence as print artifact and electronic website. Spanning both media, the project optimizes the advantages of each and implicitly makes the case for recognizing the specificity of media. The print book, with its superior visual resolution, hacker-proof sturdiness and easy portability, permits readers to continue long after eyestrain and Repetitive Stress Syndrome would have taken a toll on even the most dedicated website visitor. The website, with its capacious storage space, multimedia capabilities, and sophisticated search functions, offers an ease of access and a diversity of material that enable research to be undertaken that often
could not be done at all from print materials alone. Combined, the book and website offer unparalleled breadth and depth of research on crowds that will be likely to remain the gold standard on this topic for some time to come.