

INTRODUCTION  
'60S THEORY/'90S PRACTICE

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This volume seeks to explore the ways in which the recent shifts in the material conditions affecting the academy have influenced the theory and praxis of the Next Generation of literary critics. Generations are, of course, notoriously difficult to define, and academic ones are no different. Whereas in an earlier era one could probably rely on a strictly chronological rubric, assuming that "the next generation" refers to critics who grew up in the '70s and went to grad school in the '80s, the fact of people returning to the profession after some years of doing something else makes the chronological approach less than entirely satisfactory. Generally, I have in mind critics who are now at the beginning of their careers, people who are in graduate school or are assistant professors. If tenured, then tenured only recently. The common denominator, however, is that everyone in the next generation received the various approaches and epistemologies signified by the shorthand term *Theory*, second-, if not thirdhand. Theory is something we (and it should be understood that *we* means *my* sense of "we"; others disagree with these views) are taught in graduate school, not something that we discovered for ourselves at its originary moment. Theory, in other words, for the next generation does not have the sense of bold discovery that reading Foucault or Derrida might have had in the late '60s or early '70s. Rather, theory is something that comes along with graduate education, a body of knowledge and a language to be mastered. It is, in this sense, institutionalized, packaged, and commodified. While the ideas themselves have not lost their potency or relevance, theory now comes to us in a different mode than it did initially. Consequently, someone born in 1968 belongs to the same *professional* generation as someone born in 1958.

It has become a critical commonplace that interpretation both reflects and shapes its particular cultural moment. Terry Eagleton, for example, has demonstrated how the social conditions of the 1920s and 1930s shaped the formation of New Criticism,<sup>1</sup> and much has been done on how shifts in historical and ideological contexts resulted in shifts in the interpretations of various texts. The disillusionment after World War I, for instance, made possible the first skeptical interpretations of Shakespeare's *Henry V*,<sup>2</sup> and the influence of the '60s on theoretical developments is taken for granted (if not yet subjected to sustained scrutiny). But the symbiotic relationship between culture and criticism leads directly to the problem that this collection seeks to reveal and address.

Since the next generation faces an entirely different scene, socially, politically, materially, and professionally, than previous generations, how does our social moment and the changes in university culture infect *our* criticism? our sense of the profession?

our modes of scholarship? How do we receive paradigms that originated in an historical moment other than our own? What paradigms of our own have we produced? How has the corporatization of the academy affected those at the beginning of their careers, and how will it shape those careers? The same question obtains for the influence of computers, the Internet and the various proposed "virtual" universities. What kinds of criticism will we write—indeed, are currently writing? In sum, if the '60s produced "theory," what are the '80s and '90s producing?

One of the most salient distinctions between the critics who came of age in the '60s and those of my (chronological) generation lies in our attitude toward our predecessors. Our teachers often fought tooth and nail with their own, declaring their independence by adopting a variety of texts and authors that their teachers probably did not understand, or if they did, did not like. Yet the next generation has largely adopted the same texts our teachers used as guideposts and authorities for our own work.<sup>3</sup> The irony of this phenomenon is that the critical practice of forefathers and foremothers originated in a visceral, if not vicious, *rejection* of their own teachers' work. Faced with critical practices often emphasizing unity and social hierarchy, critical practices that have their roots in World War II and the Cold War, the most influential '60s generation critics devised methodologies that exposed fissures, questioned unspoken assumptions, and generally adopted a "hermeneutics of suspicion" toward literature and criticism. "Literature" turned into "texts," and these "texts," no longer "read," are "challenged" or "interrogated."

Curiously, most of the next generation has uncritically and unproblematically accepted these theoretical paradigms.<sup>4</sup> A quick glance over the bibliographies and indices from books produced by critics and graduate students who belong both professionally and chronologically to the next generation shows that we accept the "hermeneutics of suspicion" *without* much suspicion; we rarely "interrogate" the notion that texts ought to be read against the grain. The same figures who guided our teachers' work guide our own: Foucault and Derrida, Raymond Williams and Lawrence Stone, Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner figure in our bibliographies as much as, say, Greenblatt's or Louis Montrose's.<sup>5</sup> We are not reading anything or anybody new or different from those voices who inspired and guided the previous generation's work. We often continue to fight the same critical battles as our teachers, as evidenced by the continuing denunciation (among '90s generation early modern scholars) of the New Critical lack of historicity or E. M. W. Tillyard's mistaking *an* Elizabethan World Picture for *the* Elizabethan World Picture.<sup>6</sup> And even when we criticize our elders, it is generally done on their own terms and for not following through on their insights, not from the standpoint of a radically new theoretical approach. For example, the New Historicism is often castigated for not going far enough; that is, for not including gender among its objects of analysis, a point that was made almost contemporaneously with this movement's conception.<sup>7</sup>

What's wrong with us? Are we just a bunch of Greenblatt wannabes? of unreconstructed deconstructionists discovering the instability of the text over and over again?

Perhaps, but then again, maybe the problem does not lie with us. The kind of generational warfare between, say, the old and new historicists, does not look particularly edifying or useful from our perspective. And one might also ask what law demands that each generation must without fail or exception denounce their predecessors and come up with something they think is brand new? Does each generation, in other words, have to repeat the Oedipus story in order to achieve critical independence? Perhaps we do not have to violently reject what the previous generation believed, but can simply proceed, making our differences known without hostility or polemics, continuing the discussion rather than trying to create an entirely new one, producing finer grained analyses rather than entirely novel ones.

Yet there are also good historical and professional reasons for what might be called our lack of originality. To state the obvious, the '60s marked a watershed in American, indeed world, life and culture, and the theories produced in the '60s, as Walter Cohen and Don E. Wayne have said, were part of a much larger rethinking, *oppositional* rethinking, of values.<sup>8</sup> No such cultural upheaval marks the '80s and '90s; consequently, no such upheaval marks our writing. Furthermore, unlike in the '60s, aside from the standard tensions between parents and children, nothing like the "generation gap" separates us from our parents, professional or otherwise, and the criticism of my generation reflects this sad or happy, depending on one's perspective, cultural fact. Interestingly, this preference for marked trails, this reticence toward striking out on our own, also characterizes the recent resurgence in conservative thought. As an article in *The New York Times Magazine* (12 February 1995) makes clear, many of the newer voices of conservatism are the *sons* of important conservatives (Norman Podhoretz and Midge Decter produced John Podhoretz, Irving Kristol is the father of William Kristol, Adam Bellow the son of Saul, etc.).<sup>9</sup> For those of us who chronologically belong to the next generation, on both sides of the left/right chasm we by and large see little reason to reject our fathers and mothers.

Yet there is also a less benign element shaping the next generation's perspectives—the pressure of the job market. As everyone knows, and as Bettina Huber's statistics in the *MLA Newsletter* reiterate with depressing precision, each year brings fewer and fewer positions,<sup>10</sup> and the downturn in opportunities is matched by an upswing in almost absurdly qualified candidates.<sup>11</sup> The resulting fierce competition for these ever-decreasing slots hardly encourages bold departures from the norm, as the next generation depends far too much upon the good will of our teachers and superiors to risk much in the way of critical disagreement. Even the common adoption of the language of contestation constitutes a bow toward our elders, as they more or less invented this language. We need their approval for letters of recommendation, and we need hiring committees (generally drawn from the senior ranks of the department who, obviously, will constitute the majority in any vote) to like us so we will get the offer. We need to publish in journals our elders edit and with presses they control in order to stay hired, and we need their further approval to get tenure. In sum, thumbing our nose at our teachers risks alienating precisely the generation upon whom our professional survival depends. And as an unfortunate number of my friends and col-

leagues are learning all too well, once out of the profession, it is exceedingly hard, if not impossible, to get back in.

The result is not only an emphasis upon sociability, but increasing, if subtle, pressure to write not what we feel, but what we think we ought to say, to paraphrase the last lines of *King Lear*. Granted, such pressures have always existed. New criticism created a scandal in its own day, and there are instances of '60s generation critics, such as Colin McCabe, having employment problems due to their theoretical orientation. Yet the contraction of the market has, I think, rendered this generation particularly risk-averse. When there are anywhere from 250 to 500 applicants for every position (rumor has it that Berkeley once received 900 applicants for an Americanist position), taking on an entire critical tradition, as, say, Jonathan Dollimore did in *Radical Tragedy* or Stanley Fish in *Surprised by Sin*, would seem especially ill-advised for someone who would probably face representatives of that tradition in a job interview or a tenure review. We do not have the luxury of assuming that if we do not get X job, there will probably be Y job.

A marvelous anecdote Annabel Patterson recounts concerning one of her early job searches puts into stark relief the different pressures faced by the next generation: "In the early 1980s, I greatly disconcerted a director of undergraduate studies at an Ivy League school by declaring, as a candidate for a job, that I would not teach their standard course in metaphysical poetry."<sup>12</sup> Although opportunities declined in the early '80s, it is worth remembering that Patterson uttered this statement before she became the "star" she is today and when the market consisted of between thirteen hundred and fifteen hundred positions in English literature. We face significantly fewer positions (about one thousand advertisements in the 1995–96 *Job Information List*, and a good number of these jobs either never materialized or were canceled, so the actual number is probably around eight hundred to nine hundred) and I doubt that many of us on the market over the last couple of years would have taken such an iconoclastic position toward a hiring committee, Ivy League or otherwise. Certainly I did not.

Hence a certain sameness starts to creep into scholarship, a certain predictability about conclusions, a certain reticence toward taking positions that might either lead to rejection at journals with considerable professional capital (e.g., *ELR*, *ELH*, *Representations*, *Modern Philology*, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*) or alienating influential people and hiring committees. To put the matter another way, there is implicit pressure to produce work that we *think* will be professionally advantageous in terms of either getting or keeping a job (I emphasize "think" because we are not always right and neither publishing nor hiring decisions are neatly predictable). And if nothing else, when Alan Sokal published his mock essay in *Social Text*, he proved that it is more than possible to write in a theoretical mode one does not believe in solely for the purpose of getting published.

But at exactly the same time, there are other, more optimistic perspectives on the next generation's position. I like to compare the next generation's literary criticism with the present state of jazz, which has gone through a similar evolution. To

simplify greatly, jazz developed from the formalism of New Orleans style playing and the swing era to the unclinging of structures by Miles Davis et al., to the complete atonality of free jazz. Stricter forms ceded place to looser forms, which ceded in turn to no form at all. The question facing postsixties jazz musicians is where does one go after the squeaks, honks, and bleats of late Coltrane and Ornette Coleman? If one defines music as organized sound, how does one progress after sound has been completely disorganized? One cannot push the envelope of harmony or form any further because the envelope no longer exists.

Somewhat analogously (I recognize that the correspondences are more evocative than exact), literary criticism has progressed, if that is the appropriate term, from the formalism of New Criticism to the mandarin freedom of Derridean and de Manian deconstruction and of Barthesian *jouissance*. We have gone from an absolute and unquestioned faith in the connection between text and author, a faith shared with nonspecialists, to an equally absolute faith in the separation between sign and signified, between statement and understanding. Indeed, according to de Man, understanding does not exist, only misunderstanding.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, many have claimed that jazz lost its audience when it lost its swing. In other words, when jazz turned away from popular acceptance and toward the harsher sounds of the avant garde, people stopped listening and stopped buying. Jazz thus became the music of an elite, a coterie, rather than a popular idiom. Most people knew Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo," for instance; comparatively few listen to John Coltrane's "Live in Japan," let alone Anthony Braxton's, Cecil Taylor's, or John Zorn's work. And as the academy's detractors have pointed out, in place of using a language understandable by a general, intelligent audience, many literary critics adopted a style difficult even for initiates to penetrate (e.g., "As an articulation of displacement and dislocation, it is now possible to identify 'the cultural' as a disposal of power, a negative transparency that comes to be agonistically constructed *on the boundary* between frame of reference/frame of mind").<sup>14</sup> Whereas Ellington and Irving Howe reached a broad, popular audience, most academic critics today speak only to those within their immediate circles.<sup>15</sup>

What to do? Interestingly, both jazz musicians and the next generation of literary critics have reacted in parallel ways, and, I think, for similar reasons. The first has to do with improving public relations and trying to reach a wider audience. Eschewing the kind of public arrogance cultivated by Miles Davis, Wynton Marsalis has become a kind of roving ambassador for jazz, trying to reach not only a wider audience through becoming the director of Lincoln Center's jazz program, but also trying to proselytize to nonjazz listeners and children through his radio, television, and video programs. In essence, Marsalis has turned himself into the Leonard Bernstein of jazz, spreading the word and popularizing what had been perceived as an elite music. Analogously, a highly visible minority of literary critics are trying to break through to a nonacademic audience by publishing in such less rarified (yet still intellectual) venues as *Harper's*, *VLS*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*. Also, a number of important critics, including Stephen Greenblatt, have contributed to *What's the Word*, "a series of radio programs designed to promote understanding of the work done by

language and literature teachers.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, academic critics are increasingly trying to write for the public sphere; that is, the intellectual world outside the immediate confines of their particular disciplines. Like Marsalis proving that jazz is accessible and jazz musicians are neither misanthropes nor drug-addicted eccentrics, when such critics as Michael Bérubé, Henry Louis Gates, and Jeffrey Williams write for nonacademic readers, they demonstrate that English (or cultural studies) professors are neither tenured barbarians nor modern versions of Mr. Chips. Furthermore, they demonstrate that contemporary critical approaches can be applied to difficult topical issues in ways that everyone who cares to can understand.

Second, Marsalis and those following in his wake (e.g., Roy Hargrove, Christian McBride, Brad Mehldau, Terence Blanchard, and Joshua Redman, an admittedly arbitrary list but these are my favorites) confronted the problem of originality by quite deliberately combining the “old” and the “new,” by going backward and reinserting swing, melody, tonality, *and* atonality into their improvisations. A similar movement is, I propose, constitutive of much ‘90s generation literary criticism. Like Marsalis and others, we cannot go any further in terms of dissolution of form or interpretive freedom. Once the Author does not exist, we cannot prove that the Author is even deader than Foucault believed. We can either go backward and recover authorial intention or provide further proof for Foucault’s essay by recovering the seemingly mundane details of book production, and the like.<sup>17</sup> Either way, this development leaves us open to charges of unoriginality and timidity. Yet one can look at the matter in yet another way.

When Marsalis plays a solo, he employs the entirety of jazz history in his music. Similarly, both Joshua Redman and James Carter combine within the space of one solo Ben Webster’s breathy romanticism, Sonny Rollins’s improvisational rigor, and the very late Coltrane’s explosions of sound.<sup>18</sup> The originality of these musicians lies in their recombinative and synthetic skills, in using the elements of the past to create something new and, to my ears, entirely wonderful.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the next generation of literary critics can use the insights of new historicism, feminism, new criticism, deconstruction, indeed the entirety of literary theory, however we feel like and in whatever measure seems appropriate.

What does such scholarship actually look like? Claire McEachern’s *The Poetics of English Nationhood: 1590–1612*, published by Cambridge University Press in their highly prestigious series, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture, exemplifies these developments.<sup>20</sup> McEachern was born in 1963, thus she fits chronologically within the next generation, and she studiously adopts a *via media* in describing her methodology. Navigating between the Scylla of ‘60s generation new historicism (“For many literary critics, the historical event often functions as the prefatory point of departure, the warrant cited in passing”) and historians, for whom “literature functions as a kind of high cultural flourish, a nice epigraph, a poetic way of saying what must be proven first less glamorously” (3), McEachern situates herself right in the middle and unapologetically takes from both what she needs:



Studies which attempt to negotiate between these two evidentiary standards are doomed to fall, as it were, between two schools. . . . Nonetheless, this is the most interesting place to be. The function of the “non-literary” in this account is not a determinative one—the literary texts here are not read as reflections of contexts, or even, in that conveniently vague new historicist term, interrogations of them. But nor, to suggest the other extreme, is this a source study, an account of authors freely choosing their terms from inert predecessors. (3)

McEachern’s next generational approach also manifests itself in her relationship to the state and to previous scholarship. Significantly, McEachern differentiates her work from Richard Helgerson’s on specifically generational grounds. The new historicism (in all its fuzziness) is, as I have said, a product of the ’60s, and as one would expect, its practitioners generally take a rather dim view of the state. McEachern, though, belongs to the next generation, and our experience does not include Vietnam, student riots, and Alabama sheriffs sickening dogs on civil rights protesters. Her view of the state is correspondingly different:

What Helgerson shares with his own generation of literary critics is a conviction of the ultimately hegemonic determination of the state in this period, and by extension, of the “more dutiful” nation constructed for it. The governing new historicist understanding of the Tudor-Stuart state is of a system absolutist in ambition if not in accomplishment, one in which the interest and power of a few sought to control the interest and agencies of the many (20–21).

McEachern proposes a more irenic, more inclusive, and certainly more benign view:

What I am suggesting is not that we work harder to defend the boundary between literature and propaganda, or literature and the state—that would be to argue for the subversive agency of literature. On the contrary, I would argue for the fellowship of literature and propaganda, and the expression in both alike of the *state itself as a utopian structure*: to entertain the idea that the state was indeed, upon occasion, a place where (imaginatively speaking) “many a captain kissed the queen’s hand” (and not just, as Marx said of Spenser, her arse). In other words, I would urge less that we work to “save literature” from propaganda than that we save propaganda from pettiness, and hegemony from a unequivocally coercive construction. (23; emphasis in the original)

In other words, while McEachern uses the theoretical tools devised by ’60s generation critics, she adapts them to create a vision of the early modern period more in keeping with the next generation’s experience (and, interestingly, more in keeping with the nostalgic view of the Renaissance expressed by E. M. W. Tillyard and C. S. Lewis, precisely the people Helgerson et al. reacted against).<sup>21</sup> If her book lacks the fiery polem-

ical edge enlivening, say, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's 1985 anthology *Political Shakespeare* (considered the foundational text for cultural materialism, the harder-shell Marxist cousin of American new historicism), that is in large part because the next generation also lacks that polemical edge.

Yet this irenic position, this freedom to combine older and new critical paradigms, while producing interesting and important work (such as McEachern's), nonetheless also demonstrates that nothing really matters anymore in whatever theory one chooses to use. In *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, John Guillory suggests, inter alia, that the canon wars are entirely beside the point because literature itself, and by extension, the paradigms used to study it, have become entirely beside the point. The fact is, literature has lost the cultural capital that once made reading it an essential activity:<sup>22</sup>

The decline of the humanities was never the result of newer noncanonical courses or texts, but of a large-scale "capital flight" in the domain of culture. The debate over what amounts to the supplementation (or modernization) of the traditional curriculum is thus a misplaced response to that capital flight. . . . Since both canonical and noncanonical works constitute at base, despite their apparent conflict, the same *kind* of cultural capital, the social forces displacing this kind of capital will sooner or later strand the participants in the canon debate on an ever shrinking island within the university itself.

Clearly, Guillory is not wrong, and part of the work of the next generation must be the reinvigoration, assuming that is possible, of both the canon and literary studies, if for no other reason than self-preservation. For that, we must ask ourselves and those who came before us why exactly we are doing what we are doing and then translate the answers into some kind of public program (or programs, since it is highly unlikely that a single program could adequately represent the diversity of this profession). In other words, for both jazz musicians and literary critics, the rapprochement between the generations has become a matter of survival. For jazz musicians, the audience, the *paying* audience, for their work had dwindled to the point that it was simply impossible to make a living. Even so, for literary critics, the matter is a little different.

Perhaps the most important difference between the next generation and its forebears lies in the changes within the academy itself, the increasing emphasis on corporatization and corporate values (one chancellor of the California State University system, for instance, liked to refer to himself as the CEO, nor is he alone in doing so),<sup>23</sup> and another chancellor (or CEO) of the CSU, Charles B. Reed, asserted that "Cal Poly and the other 22 institutions of the CSU [California State University] all are in the same business that business and industry are in."<sup>24</sup> Faced with dwindling state and private support, many university administrations have turned to private corporations to make up the difference, with the result that education (at all levels) is increasingly viewed as an exploitable market by business interests. Furthermore, the confluence between education and business is being encouraged, to put it mildly, by administrators



who want to turn the university into a corporation of sorts.<sup>25</sup> Hence the steady attacks on tenure (under the rubric of “flexibility”), the decline in tenure-track positions, and the alarming increase in the use of adjuncts to teach both basic and advanced courses.<sup>26</sup> But also, the corporatization of the academy dehumanizes the students (or “customers,” as they are often now referred to). Reed, for example, compares the summer break to factories or “plants [that] are down two or three months of the year,” which implies that students are commodities no different than widgets.<sup>27</sup>

It is in this context that we need to see the phenomenal (and for the most part, entirely uncritical) drive toward wiring the academy. Certainly, computers have aided research by speeding things up exponentially. Instead of paging through volume after volume of the MLA Bibliography, one can now use a CD-ROM, or even access the bibliography from one’s home computer if one’s institution has it online. In place of writing letters, we can now email each other, thus speeding up communications. Furthermore, the various listservs and discussion groups make discussion between those with like interests much easier. The question remains, though, whether “faster” means “fundamentally different.” Doubtless, we can communicate with each other much more quickly, but that does not mean that the kinds of criticism we produce has actually changed. No doubt, computers are having an effect on the next generation, but it may not be the expected one.

An increasing percentage of decreasing dollars available for higher education is being devoted to technology, with the result that less money goes to maintaining libraries or funding tenure-track positions. In fact, some even maintain that conventional libraries are a thing of the past, and so purchasing books and journals is as outdated as investing in the horse and buggy.<sup>28</sup> Yet despite the hype, the bulk of our research is still done using printed materials, and the bulk of university press books and older archives are not available online. As Edward Rothstein, author of the *New York Times* technology column, writes: “The Internet will not come close to replacing even the most ordinary library until every book of importance is published in digital form, financial arrangements are worked out with publishers, and search engines become as powerful as the index in back of a reference book. Right now, even the most limited local library has much the Internet cannot touch.”<sup>29</sup> One can also add the problem of planned obsolescence in archiving technology (older CD-ROMS, for instance, cannot be read by newer CD-ROM machines, and CD-ROMS themselves will doubtless be replaced eventually), which means that one is always upgrading and replacing, even though library budgets are dwindling. Furthermore, computers also threaten to exacerbate the job crisis, since, in the zero-sum game of university funding, money spent on technology means less money for tenure-track positions. Florida Gulf Coast University and the Arizona International Campus represent the confluence of these trends, as both are new institutions devoted to long-distance learning and without tenure-track positions. But even more traditional universities are starting to combine computer-based, long-distance learning with for-profit education.<sup>30</sup>

I would therefore suggest that the move toward recovering more traditional concepts and modes of interpretation by the next generation constitutes in part a *de-*

*fensive* move. After one has deconstructed the author and demonstrated the imperialist roots of disciplinary boundaries, it becomes increasingly difficult to then argue for more tenure-track lines in literature to administrators who see little monetary value in such courses, who see the at times inflammatory rhetoric emanating from literature departments driving away state or private contributor dollars (see Barbara Riebling's chapter in this volume), and who regard the traditional classroom as expensive and outmoded. And there is the further irony in how arguments for the importance (read continuing funding) of the humanities often reiterate precisely the language that the new historicism and its allied approaches made so unstylish. Whereas the previous generation invented "strategic essentialism," the next generation might have to adopt "strategic conservatism" simply in order to survive.

Moreover, the corporatization of university life has made life even more uncertain for the nontenure track, as Kalí Tal discovered. Professor Tal, lured to the Arizona International Campus with all sorts of promises, made the unfortunate mistake of critiquing the "school's" provost and discovered that she could be fired without any chance for appeal, since "the University of Arizona's standard terms for the 'non-tenure-eligible' . . . stipulate that renewal decisions are made solely by the dean or provost and are 'not subject to further administrative review.'"<sup>31</sup> While Professor Tal ultimately prevailed in her legal battle (she was reinstated), the popularity of "tenure reform," which usually means attempts to get rid of tenure, argue that her experiences are symbolic of the new realities facing the next generation. Others finding themselves in her position may not be as fortunate.

While I certainly would agree that the greater part of the work produced by any generation is derivative, there is a new element at work with this group. The greater caution and the lack of pathbreaking thinking among the next generation results, I propose, in part from the extremely vulnerable position of the humanities and its practitioners in the shifting culture of the academy, and the move toward a greater presence in the nonacademic public sphere results from our need to ensure continued funding. Moreover, the move to consolidate older and newer approaches has some of its roots in a perception that we need to do so in order to preserve our tenure-track lines that might otherwise go to more "productive" departments. The same applies to the increasing rhetoric over reprivileging teaching. Universities under financial and political pressure want to ensure that students are getting value for their tuition dollars and legislators are getting value for the money they put into higher education (the definition of *getting value*, of course, like the definition of *productivity*, is highly problematic, and shifts dramatically among different constituencies; in my experience, at least, university administrators define these terms very differently than the faculty do). Publishing an article in *PMLA* may justify one's existence within the confines of the profession, but teaching courses with large enrollments tends to be a more persuasive justification outside the profession. It is no accident, as David Galef demonstrates below, that rhetoric/composition studies, as well as creative writing, have become growth industries in academia, a development one might not want to celebrate.

Concomitantly, the seeming unoriginality of the next generation also reflects

the pervading sense of insecurity and changing criteria for raises. At many schools, financial advancement and professional development are not divorced: publish a book, get a raise. Get a good review, get an even larger raise. And while this often still applies, at other schools, mainly the nonelite ones that most of us work at, committee work, community service, and teaching classes with large enrollments rather than publication are swiftly becoming the primary avenues toward raises and even tenure.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, as several of the contributors point out, the popularity among administrators for modeling the university after the corporation entails a radical devaluation of scholarship's worth. James F. Carlin, for example, the chairman of the Board of Higher Education of Massachusetts, an insurance and real estate magnate with no academic credentials other than a B.S. in business administration, announced that "Professors should teach more than 12 hours a week, and 'meaningless research' should be banned; 50 percent of research outside the hard sciences was 'a lot of foolishness.'"<sup>33</sup>

Needless to say, under such pressure, there is a decreasing sense of reward for doing scholarly work. Teaching may very well represent the next generation's opportunity for distinguishing itself, as Gerald Graff suggests, but many of us are being pushed there by the lack of understanding of and sympathy for traditional scholarship that does not necessarily have an immediate business application.

In sum, the next generation faces a myriad of institutional pressures that did not exist for our teachers. Until fairly recently, corporate America was not considered an appropriate model for higher education, and there was little sense that teaching literature or literary theory had to be justified on purely economic grounds. The next generation's irenic moves, in other words, stem in good measure from our need to appear unthreatening to those holding the purse strings as well as from our need to change our image in the public's eye. Furthermore, our continuing along previously forged critical paths results, again in part, from pressures to teach more and to defend ourselves to nonacademic audiences. Many of us do not, in other words, have the time—that is, the reduced course loads—or the psychic space to worry about inventing new theoretical paradigms.

Yet at the same time, the defensiveness of the next generation is also a prelude to taking the offensive, as several of the contributors emphasize the profession's ongoing commitment to social change and social action, both inside and outside academia (see the essays by Bartolovich and Swan as well as Bérubé's epilogue), although both the goals and the means have become much more practical. Furthermore, while Riebling may condemn the overheated rhetoric that sometimes overtakes the humanities, her goal is actually the same as the more overtly politically committed essays. Riebling's argument is that to effect change, one must first be heard. The difference between her and Swan or Bartolovich lies in means, not ends. Consequently, an important element of the next generation's work will be striving to improve the working conditions of our colleagues in the knowledge industry through joining unions, among other means, in addition to worrying about the workers in other industries, while at the same time Copyrighted Material traditional objects of study. And

it is likely that we will be spending more time doing public writing, that is to say, responding to negative stories about us in the media with letters to the editor and putting our own views forward in the popular media (e.g., newspapers) about the conditions of university teaching using arguments and language that nonspecialists not only will understand, but find persuasive.<sup>34</sup> “Strategic conservatism,” in other words, my admittedly provocative phrase, constitutes a strategy for effecting change, not a call for retreat or quietism.

To be sure, not all the contributors agree with this assessment—some passionately disagree with it—but these differences are consistent with my sense of the next generation’s overall suspicion of totalizing or grand schemes. As the essays below will show, the next generation puts forward no overarching critical approach. To assert, as Paul de Man infamously did, that deconstruction (or any other critical methodology) will constitute the work of *all* future literary criticism is simply risible, if not conceptually impossible.<sup>35</sup> Having before us the rise and fall of so many critical empires, we are rightly skeptical of anyone promising an all-encompassing critical dogma. Yet, that does not mean that we are entirely rudderless or have no sense of where we want to go.

Jeffrey Williams coins the term *posttheory* to define this generation’s position both theoretically, “its seeming lateness on the scene, coming after the monumental successes of the great Theories,” and professionally—that is, we inhabit “a job-traumatized field, after the post-Fordist reconfiguration of the university and university labor.” Williams defines our critical work thus: “the project of posttheory seems to have shifted to localized units of production, similar to microbreweries, away from large-scale, totalizing concepts such as class, or race or sex for that matter.” Yet Williams also notes that a distinguishing characteristic of our theoretical moment may be the move toward more public forms of discourse, publishing, say, in the *VLS* or *The New Yorker* as much as *ELH* or *English Literary Renaissance*.

Sharon O’Dair’s “Stars, Tenure, and the Death of Ambition” addresses the conditions under which the next generation works. In recent years, much has been written, most of it negative, about the emergence of a star system or cult of celebrity in literary and cultural study. And even more, perhaps, has been written about the collapse of the job market in literary and cultural study. O’Dair ties the two together by suggesting that the emergence of the star system is symptomatic, the result of the collapse. The collapse of the job market, in turn, is not about a fall-off in absolute numbers of tenure-track jobs, but rather about a collapse in a certain kind of tenure-track job, the one that allows one to pursue research and writing while teaching upper-division and graduate-level courses in literature or cultural studies.

To O’Dair, the emergence of the star system suggests not the infusion into the profession of something evil or demeaning but rather that the profession has reached a crossroads. We have yet to acknowledge that higher education increasingly is taking on the task of educating people in basic skills, skills once taught in secondary schools. What seems to be occurring is that the profession is becoming bifurcated, with some Ph.D.’s destined to teach multiple sections of composition and others to do research

and writing and the teaching of upper-division and graduate courses. For the next generation, one's potential to shine determines which destiny one will find.

Terry Caesar meditates on how the differing valences of travel have come to define the next generation's highly problematic professional future. The ability to travel for conferences and research has been, and still continues to be, the defining characteristic of academic professional success, and "The most luminous stars of any discipline are its frequent flyers" (consider the travel schedules of, say, Henry Louis Gates, Jacques Derrida, Stephen Greenblatt, or Gayatri Spivak). Yet for the next generation, Caesar argues, "nothing about their future experience . . . better represents its depleted prospects than the absent or marginalized opportunity to travel." Paradoxically, however, it is the definition of travel that has also changed, for where Derrida, Gates, and Greenblatt et al. travel as a sign of professional success, many of the next generation travel as a sign of professional marginalization, i.e. the part-time lecturer at three different institutions, the "freeway flyer," not the "frequent flyer." If the fictional narrative of the Big Theory generation is David Lodge's *Small World*, then the narrative for the next generation will be a narrative of nomads, of gypsy scholars. Yet, Caesar notes, "a more redemptive narrative is possible. It will not simply see [the gypsy scholar] lost in [the figure of Lodge's character, Kingfisher], any more than it will see the notion of a calling lost to market conditions, a career lost to jobs. . . . A liberating idea of travel—nomadic or not—may be all that is left to the next generation to deal with loss, including the loss of dignity."

Crystal Bartolovich analyzes the myth of the academic community in "To Boldly Go Where No MLA Has Gone Before," and she uses the strike at Yale by graduate students as her subject. Bartolovich points out that despite ample evidence to the contrary, the myth of academia as a serene grove characterized by "academic freedom" remains a potent one. Yet, as she writes, the myth of the "Academic Community" is one that "the next generation cannot afford to indulge uncritically." Bartolovich suggests that the anti-union stance of the Modern Language Association and many of Yale's senior faculty demonstrates that the union best represents the next generation's interests, rather than the profession's senior management, as it were. We need to "think about what 'academic community' as we wish to have it means in explicit terms," and we "cannot permit the MLA to give in to a fear of taking stands because powerful groups (such as the Yale administration) might be unhappy about it."

In "'It's a Beastly Rough Crowd I Run With': Theory and the 'New' University," Kalí Tal uses her experience at Arizona International Campus to speculate on the effects of the "new university" on the next generation and the future of the humanities. First, Tal suggests that our training (usually by '60s generation critics) in theory exacerbates generational strife because most of us will teach at nonelite institutions where Derrida, Foucault, and even Greenblatt and Fish remain opaque to many, if not most, of our older colleagues. Hence we "work in an environment in which [our] scholarship is not only incomprehensible to [our] peers, but regarded with suspicion and hostility." Given that high theory has also helped significantly diversify the

humanities, the antitheory backlash (and the sense among many administrators that theoretical work is mere “foolishness”) dovetails with the attenuation of the job market. Consequently, “The sense that the older generation has collaborated in pulling the temple down around its own ears is bolstered by the theory gap and the fact that this young generation of scholars is the most racially, ethnically, and gender-diverse cohort yet graduated by the U.S. university system.” Third, the new emphasis on corporatizing the academy puts the next generation under siege, since theoretically engaged work does not produce revenue and is in general highly critical of such entities as Microsoft. Ultimately, however, Kal senses that the next generation, unlike the ’60s generational, is in a transitional position, belonging to neither the old, relatively untroubled academy nor the new university, and what will result is not yet clear: “We stand at the division between an older university structure and some as-yet-undetermined new structure which, from all the signs, will not be any improvement.”

Jesse Swan, in “Breaking the Monopoly: The Next Generation and the Corporate Academy,” addresses the effects of the increasingly common public figurings of the academy as a corporation. After illustrating some of the ways corporate thinking currently shapes the university, Swan argues for active, and even hyperbolic, engagement of public discourses by the next generation. “When we do not counter these venal projects of corporate schemers,” Swan explains, “we allow the academy to become another dehumanized site for playing out further fantasies of the free market.” In addition to calling the next generation to public discourse, Swan proposes a series of commitments for the next generation in its scholarly as well as new public work. Most significantly, Swan urges his generation to propagate alternative figurings of the academy, which is essential so that “the academy will better its chances of vanquishing the corporate threats of exploitation and subservience it currently faces.”

Jeffrey R. Di Leo, in “New Technology and the Dilemmas of the Posttheory Generation: On the Use and Abuse of Computer and Information Technology in Higher Education Today,” offers a nuanced view of the relationship between the wired academy and the next generation. Di Leo argues that the new technological condition of the academy will affect the next generation in ways that will make difficult for them to either globally affirm or unconditionally denounce it. Some aspects of the technological revolution will clearly work to the benefit of the next generation, while others will clearly challenge their aims and ideals. The necessarily conflicted reaction that the next generation must have to this technology will make it very difficult for them not only to voice support for its increased intervention without contradicting a certain set of values that they hold, but that it will also be difficult for them to organize resistance to the rise of new technology within the academy without opposing another set of beliefs.

In “Theory after the ‘Theorists’” Neil Larsen proposes that a legitimate disgust with an academic aristocracy of “theory” is in danger of ratifying inadvertently two of theory’s most potent self-mystifications: the myth of its “sixties,” insurgent genealogy and the presumption that theory is reducible to its own institutional conditions of reproduction. In partial exception to John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* and its exhaus-



tive sociological case study of Paul de Man's theory machine, Larsen argues that theory in its formerly dominant, poststructuralist instance can only be linked to the social and ideological by reading it qua theory in a more rigorous sense—that is, by questioning whether it *is* theory. Larsen concludes by pointing out that, even in our own putatively posttheoretical moment, high theory's reification of "language" and "textuality" lives on in a more secular form in the case, for example, of "culture" as understood in a neopositivized, posttheoretical cultural studies. If theory is to be wrested from the academostars and the "techno-bureaucratic" elites, it must, in effect, first assume a nonreifying, fully critical stance vis-à-vis the sociohistorical totality.

David Galef's chapter takes a pragmatic approach to the issues facing the next generation. In the eighties, he writes, "Big Theory was at an all-time high . . . [and composition] programs were the unexciting workhorses of the industry, not flashy but dependable and necessary to the enterprise as a whole." For the next generation, however, the situation has changed radically. The "bull market" in theory jobs collapsed, and while the postwar generation's retirement proceeds apace, the projected expansion of job opportunities has not materialized, as the lines are either being closed down altogether or the classes are being filled with part-time lecturers rather than tenure-track professors. Galef, however, sees a further development, and that is the expansion of creative writing, rhetoric, and composition programs. First, the declining writing skills of incoming new students has sparked a significant increase in composition positions. And with this increase also came an increasing professionalization of composition studies: "Paradoxically, theory itself eventually gave composition its boost. For some time now, the way to legitimize a field in our profession has been to accord it serious study, to theorize it." Hence the growth of journals and conferences, indeed, entire departments, devoted to "rhet/comp." But also, the conditions of the profession itself, Galef notes, push us more and more into investigations of rhetoric and composition: "In a time of cutbacks in English departments, universities are nonetheless expanding and diversifying their writing programs." While the *MLA Job List* records fewer and fewer good tenure-track positions in old period categories, each issues boasts "scores of advertisements of posts in comp/rhet." Composition studies and creative writing (also a cash cow for the university, as Galef points out) are, in other words, growth industries, and like all growth industries they will attract more and more bodies who want to take advantage of its job prospects. The future for the next generation, in other words, may lie less in inventing a new theoretical paradigm, but in transforming service-oriented pedagogy into a theoretically sophisticated discipline in its own right.

Barbara Riebling also proposes that the next generation differs from their teachers in that we are drifting away from totalizing political claims and extreme antifoundationalism. Again, this is in good part a result of the collapsed job market. Rather than giving up, "the most characteristic response to this calamity by next generation scholars is to study their situation intently, using every hermeneutic tool at their command to analyze the forces that are crashing in upon them." To Riebling, the moral of Greenblatt's anecdote at the end of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* about the

father of the dying boy is the exact opposite of the one he draws: agency is *real*, and it is becoming an essential part of our criticism. At the same time, however, Riebling asserts that in the future, the next generation will be very careful about its battles: "Under siege from powerful forces, the next generation will be cautious about picking fights both inside and outside the discipline, and they will actively value peace and toleration." This position is not so much a retreat as a cold appraisal of the new realities, as the case of Kalí Tal amply demonstrates.

Susan Johnston worries about agency and its relationship to our ability to make ethical claims. The problem, according to Johnston, is that next generation critics "have inherited a kind of philosophy of despair, a radically nihilistic sense of resignation which goes by the name of postmodernism" which militates against making any kind of ethical argument because "any substantive ethical content perforce reflects and reifies the interests of one group at the expense of another," and she argues against the abandonment of all ethical claims in the wake of the poststructuralist discovery that all such claims are perforce "interested" and "situated." For Johnston, this is an intolerable situation, and she proposes that literary criticism "which explicitly appeals to shared ethical and moral bonds . . . cannot simply be understood as an attempt to reproduce hegemonic interests," adducing Habermas by way of creating an agenda for ethical criticism that builds on rather than repudiates the insights of the previous generation.

The volume concludes with a conversation between the editor and Gerald Graff, who argues that pedagogy constitutes the next generation's opportunity to remake the profession in its own image, and an epilogue by Michael Bérubé, who maps the recent history of criticism onto the recent history of rock and who enjoins the next generation to join various organizations, such as the AAUP or Scholars, Artists, and Writers for Social Justice (SAWSJ) so that next generation will not become the *Last* Generation.

To summarize, for most of the next generation, the job market and the general economic shifts in the North American economy figure as the seminal, shaping experience underlying our criticism, the unspoken warrant of what we choose to highlight about literature. In fact, it might not be exaggerating to say that, for most of us, getting a position will be the trauma that will haunt the rest of our professional lives for two reasons: the wretchedness of the process and, for the successful few (meaning those who have gotten tenure-track positions), the awareness that so many of our friends have not been so lucky.

Second, there is a growing impatience with the rhetorical excesses of the theory wars, perhaps exemplified by one eminent critic's (s/he shall remain anonymous) recent declaration: "Would that . . . we could all just be reasonable, fair-minded, objective. Too much water has passed under the bridge in this controversy for any such happy outcome. One side or the other is going to win out. The only real question, as the old union organizing song has it, is: Which side are you on?" In addition to the fact that the theory wars are *not our wars*,<sup>36</sup> many of us are hyperconscious of how

such rhetoric, while perhaps playing well within a certain constituency, only serves to damage our credibility with administrators and those outside the academy as well as endangering our careers.

Third, many next generation critics suggest a return to agency for the professional and contextual reasons outlined above.<sup>37</sup> But at the same time, no one argues for doing away with the important insights of poststructuralist criticism. However, just as the deconstruction of agency and of bourgeois notions of individuality resulted from the manifold contexts of the '60s, the recuperation of agency results from our awareness of the ever-increasing exploitation of part-timers inside the academy and the exploitative labor practices of many multinational corporations outside the academy, just as our awareness of our own commodification reinforces the commitment toward doing politics both through traditional channels and, pedagogy, as well as through literary criticism.

Finally, there is widespread recognition that the next generation can no longer afford the luxury of concentrating exclusively upon scholarship; rather, whether we like it or not—and to be sure, many do not like it—we must combine our critical pursuits with what Swan calls “public work” in order to combat our highly negative public image and the ensuing damage to the institution we have committed our lives to. The next generation must, in other words, become more “public intellectuals” and less private scholars, tending our garden and working on yet another examination of (say) gender or class in our literature of choice. We must also strive, as Swan suggests, to become much more active in internal matters, such as university governance in order to effect change and provide alternatives to the corporatization of the academy, while at the same time continuing our political work outside the academy.

Although the tasks before us are clear, the shape of things to come is not. We are better (or at least I am better), it must be admitted, at diagnosing our situation than presenting a solution. Nonetheless, if the next generation (so far) lacks a blindingly original voice, a “founder of discursivity,” as Foucault termed it, if we have yet to produce a Stanley Fish or a Stephen J. Greenblatt, our work elaborates, deepens, and pushes into new directions the previous work of literary criticism. Yet valuable as this work may seem, it might very well be that the task of the next generation lies more in ensuring the continued survival of the humanities. *Hoc opus, hic labor est.*

## Notes

1. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 47–53.

2. According to Michael Quinn, Gerald Gould’s “Irony and Satire in *Henry V*” provides the “first full-length assault on the traditional reading of [*Henry V*],” and this article appeared in 1919 (“Introduction,” *Shakespeare: Henry V: A Casebook*, ed. Quinn [London: Macmillan, 1989], 18).

3. One of the differences between the next generation and the '60s group is the less than

pervasive sense that the next generation even exists. Some, perhaps even many, do not regard themselves as belonging to a distinct group. My point, however, is that this by itself constitutes a significant difference between the next generation and the '60s critics, who very much regarded themselves as an entity unto themselves.

4. Which is not to say that the newer paradigms have not gone unchallenged, but such texts as Brian Vickers's *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels* and Graham Bradshaw's *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* argue for a return to pretheory days rather than providing a new alternative to, say, Dollimore and Sinfield's work on cultural materialism or Stephen Greenblatt's on cultural poetics. There is also a small but significant number of '90s generation critics who reject the '60s generation criticism as merely "fashionable," a view that would have more force if it were not for the inconvenient fact, brilliantly laid out by Gerald Graff in *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), that the New Criticism and positivist historicism were also once derided as "fashionable." One might call this movement the "new fuddy-duddyism."

5. While my examples here and elsewhere are drawn from early modern studies, since that is my primary area of specialization, they remain representative of more general developments within the field.

6. For example, Eric Mallin asserts that "Shakespeare's plays, which have *until fairly recently* been regarded as antiseptically literary, are in fact thoroughly touched . . . by the elements of the time" (*Inscribing the Time: Shakespeare and the End of Elizabethan England* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], 16; my emphasis). Leaving alone whether or not early modern studies was ever as ahistorical as often thought, my point is that the New Historicism was at least fourteen years old by the time Mallin published this brilliant study. Yet Mallin is also echoing the rhetoric of embattled novelty that one continues to find in very recent theoretically inclined work. For example, in the introduction to her edition of *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Bedford, 1997), Barbara Hodgdon writes that "the six chapters of this volume . . . reflect both traditional and emergent critical perspectives" (5), by which she means attention to marginalized groups (including but not restricted to women) and to political dissent, neither of which can be fairly characterized as an "emergent"—as opposed to a thoroughly established—critical perspective in 1997.

7. Compare, for example, Waller's 1987 feminist critique of the New Historicism in her famous article, "Academic Tootsie: The Denial of Difference and the Difference It Makes" (*Diacritics* 17 [1987]: 2–20), with Laura Levine's comments in *Men in Women's Clothing: Antitheatricality and Effeminization 1579–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8, 11. I am not criticizing Levine, whose work has influenced my own work on antipoetic sentiment, but merely suggesting that she is in this particular instance representative of a common phenomenon.

8. Cohen, "Political Criticism of Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), 18; Wayne, "Power, Politics, and the Shakespearean Text: Recent Criticism in England and the United States," *Shakespeare Reproduced*, 48.

9. Similarly, the ideas of the so-called conservative revolution of the 1994 elections, which