What was Generation X?

When Douglas Coupland published his first novel, Generation X: Tales for a New Century, he introduced a collection of fiction and nonfiction pieces, including canonical works by writers such as Coupland and Richard Linklater, to be published from both mainstream (i.e., E.M. Forster’s ‘Lolita’ and ‘The Fountainhead’) and alternative (i.e., ‘Full Metal Jacket’ and ‘The History Boys’) publications. To get an overview of “generation X” as discourse, The Gen X Reader serves as the ideal choice for the post-boomer generation.

The book Generation X, with its catalogue of witty aphorisms in the margins of each page, have infiltrated North American lexicon to a degree for surpassing its actual readership. Like the Bible, the Communist Manifesto, or the Declaration of American Rights, Generation X does not have to be read to be “known.”

Given the astounding reception accorded to Generation X, it comes as no surprise that John Frater, the then editor of Aesthetic, a magazine devoted to contemporary literature, referred to Coupland as “the Dalai Lama of the Next Generation” (March 1992). While not wishing to diminish the impact of Coupland’s work on American popular culture—he who is regularly solicited to write for youth market magazines such as Wired (U.S.) and Stiff (Canada)—it would seem premature to dismiss him as the voice of a generation. The slipperiness between Generation X and Coupland’s writing is understandable, as the author of a text whose time has come. Like the title and the marginal aphorisms, Coupland is the author of just another wave of countercultural theorists, a sort of postmodern Platonic figure, a sort of Happy Ending Platonist, a sort of future Copernican. The book’s treatment of “generation X” is given in one of the many provocative essays in New Young American Writers (New Generation) edited by Lorrie Moore. “That baby-boomers,” Lorrie argues, “that the people only willing to listen to the music of the 60’s and 70’s who have a special place in the history of that decade.” She concludes: “We are not the children of the 60’s, nor are we the children of the 70’s. We are the children of the 90’s.”

Along the way, the younger is treated to a series of sadnesses which little to explain the situation, but rather moral panic and disdain.

One of the most significant contributions to the generational landscape of white youth—and one which reveals the gender bias of genre— is Late Bloomers, coming of age in the 1990s (at 5:00) by Donald Lipzick and Alexander Abrams. The book offers “comprehensive, non-contradictory analysis and the pictures of two clean-cut white men in suits should offer a reader for this: ‘I didn’t imagine that better thing, but it’s not something you should worry about it.’”

the streets with guns or Molotov cocktails anytime soon. And why should we? Just because we’re not prepared to die to eliminate the national debt or wipe out poverty doesn’t mean we can’t get involved in changing the country and protecting our future.

Resolution X offers an extensive resource list for political action including addresses and phone numbers of advocacy groups, politicians, and both mainstream and alternative media. Unfortunately, though it is bigger and more street wise than Late Bloomers, it is cut from the same cloth. While Lipsky and Abrams might vote Republican, Nelson and Cowan's "post-partisan" revolution is content to get you out to the ballot box, presumably to vote Democrat.

The problem with Slack and Generation X, I name the two most influential renditions of the North American post-fordist generation, is that they substitute anthropological and literary insight for historical rigour. While geezers are in a unique position to reconstruct the down sides of "free market" capitalism, their spokesmen have failed to characterize them as ahistorical, apathetic social drop outs. The failure of this new movement has been a string of lamentable movies: Aggressive fast-food ad campaigns produced by an industry besetted by Coupland's claim that "we are not a target market"; the appropriations by the music, television and fashion industries of grunge rock and fashion as a kind of anti-moment of the whole phenomenon; and the emergence of Seattle as a new cultural mecca, a San Francisco of the 80’s. As the 90’s wear on, however, "gener-shelves". Despite its lack leg the 80's ethos of individualism and greed, it was Late Bloomer that attracted some critical attention, thanks to a pre-publication excerpt in Harper's (July 1984). Lipsky and Abrams presented some media analysis which showed that, until 1980, major newspapers and magazines had portrayed youth as confident, ambitious, determined, fiercely self-sufficient and more "older than they used to be." Suddenly, in 1980, this all changed. Time published a cover story entitled "Proceeding With Caution" which characterized youth as paranoid thinkers, who were "overly sensitive at best and lazy at worst" and for whom "second best seems just fine." Fortune, which had

"Didn't we imagine we'd be easy in our lives—that life would be an affair of lawns and washed cars and coming in through the front doors of our houses?"

for historical rigour. While geezers are in a unique position to reconstruct the down sides of “free market” capitalism, their spokesmen have failed to characterize them as ahistorical, apathetic social drop outs. The failure of this new movement has been a string of lamentable movies: Aggressive fast-food ad campaigns produced by an industry besetted by Coupland's claim that "we are not a target market"; the appropriations by the music, television and fashion industries of grunge rock and fashion as a kind of anti-moment of the whole phenomenon; and the emergence of Seattle as a new cultural mecca, a San Francisco of the 80’s. As the 90’s wear on, however, "gener-shelves". Despite its lack leg the 80's ethos of individualism and greed, it was Late Bloomer that attracted some critical attention, thanks to a pre-publication excerpt in Harper's (July 1984). Lipsky and Abrams presented some media analysis which showed that, until 1980, major newspapers and magazines had portrayed youth as confident, ambitious, determined, fiercely self-sufficient and more "older than they used to be." Suddenly, in 1980, this all changed. Time published a cover story entitled "Proceeding With Caution" which characterized youth as paranoid thinkers, who were "overly sensitive at best and lazy at worst" and for whom "second best seems just fine." Fortune, which had
"I got tired of putting my face where other people stick," she said. "It was giving me low self-esteem."

Although the title hints at religion (the passion) and fame (Alicia), the pleasure of the text is produced by less grandiose, more intimate strategies. Alice's long, difficult stay in the hospital (where most of the action takes place) doesn't translate into longevity for the reader. ASL.


This introductory-level text on media and culture in the context of globalization is innovative in its integration of Latin American theoretical perspectives into the usual media studies canon of European and American works. Despite some rather cloying ideas of the author, this book is one of the most compelling on the marketplace of culture in an era of economic globalization. It is perhaps not the best introduction to Latin American culture theory. Lull seems unaware of the ideas of Jose Marti Baraja and others quite similar to his arguments, without putting himself on the book for some subtext of "discovery." AM.


The words of this novel—like those of the title—quieky do and don't go together. As a poet, a reference to a Group of Anzio film and its conventional as a desire for "clarity," the component of Rat Bohemia also do and don't mix. Deliberately, queer and straight don't mix, or at least they resist equally as well. Schulman's language that produces narrative fiction by giving three characters— two bisexuals and a gay man who dies of AIDS—differentiated and variously poetic monologues. The novel closes, curiously but aptly, with a "cleansed" lesbian's narrative that ends with a hetero-oriented culture—of gay speaking in queer culture.

Schulman's New York City often constructed in literature—also reads sharply, uniquely. It is a queer space that.artists, say, Paul Katro's or Jay McInerney's "big city." ASL.


Materialists Shakespeare: A History is not a history. Though conceived as such and organized chronologically from 177 to 193, it is really a culling "from the immense corpus of materialist Shakespeare criticism essays that are not only of exemplary quality but also typical of specific kinds, and, collectively, suggestive of the breadth of materialist practices in Shakespeare studies."

The range includes feminist materialists, British cultural materialists, and American new historicists, all writing Shakespeare in the light of contemporary Marxist theories.

Materialists Shakespeare has lots of intriguing, important, and difficult ideas, but only Kamps' introduction and Fredric Jameson's afterword are new. So why publish articles already available in public journals? To produce a textbook for graduate seminars. This is the expressed aim of the book, which seems designed to meet, as it were, traditional academic requirements for breadth and depth; hence, the editor's assurance that students and teachers will get materials for an intensive look at one play (three essays on Othello), for generic and historical coverage, and for study of "the most frequently taught plays" (which, this book implies, we should teach more often). In this sense the volume is thoroughly conventional. So too is the marketing hype, painted on as history, about the "metanarratives" of materialist criticism. It is a "success story...in Great Britain, Shakespeare, and the United States..." In effect, readers are offered power, the power of being "where it's at" in the academy of the old empiricism and the new. Although the packaging of the thirteen essays that make up this volume is intimidating, what's in the package is worthwhile. The essays work against the grain of Shakespearean criticism by challenging customary assumptions and readings, the most direct being Alan Sinfield's on Macbeth, Walter Cohen's on The Merchant of Venice, Michael Brain's on the "conception and amenable explanations" of Othello, Brown concludes that "Othello is a ritual of racial and sexual perspectivation". Lynda E. Boone reads the "silent history of women's silencing" in The Taming of the Shrew. For others, such as John Drakakis and Graham Hadden, not only can't read art, but also modern and postmodern, social history plays in and through the plays on the page, stage, and screen. Together the contributors to Materialists Shakespeare charge the ideological clout of Shakespeare and, as such, his alluring uselessness. AM.

Reviews by Stanley Fogel, Michael Haussmann and Ted McGregor.