

Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

Douglas Rushkoff (ed.), *The GenX Reader*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.

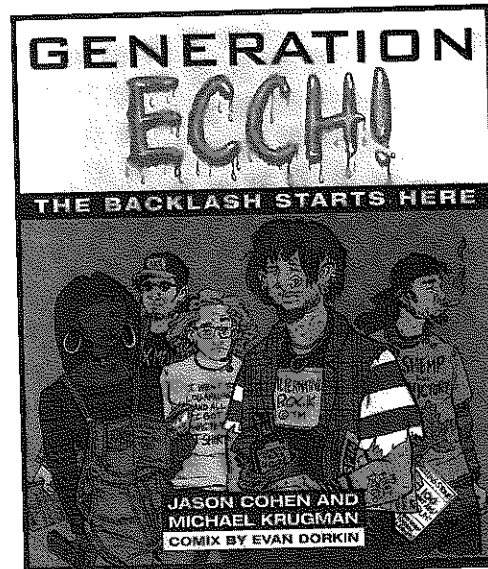
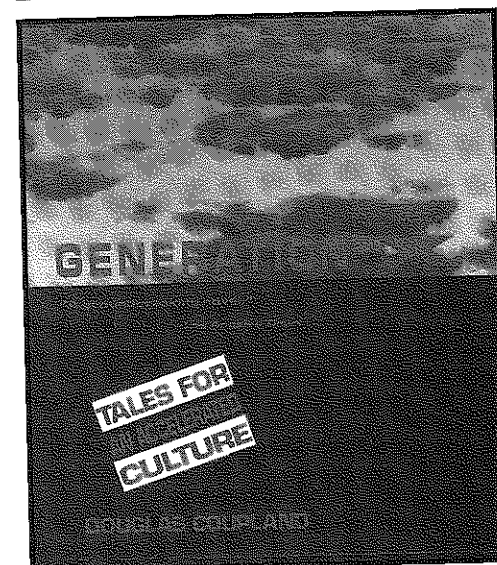
Jason Cohen and Michael Krugman, *Generation Ecch! The Backlash Starts Here*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Eric Liu (ed.), *Next: Young American Writers on the New Generation*. New York: Norton, 1994.

David Lipsky and Alexander Abrams, *Late Bloomers—Coming of Age in Today's America: The Right Place at the Wrong Time*. New York: Random House, 1994.

Rob Nelson and Jon Cowan, *Revolution X: A Survival Guide for Our Generation*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

BY Michael Hoechsmann



## What was GENERATION X?

When Douglas Coupland published his first novel, *Generation X*, he could hardly have predicted the reception it would get. "Generation X" has eclipsed itself as simply the title of a popular book; rather it has been adopted into the canon of North American cultural literacy as the definitive statement of the world-view of a specific generation. The term has slipped smoothly into common parlance, nudging out *Time* magazine's "twentysomethings" and Richard Linklater's "slackers" as the moniker of choice for the post-boomer generation. The book *Generation X*, with its catalogue of witty aphorisms in the margins of each page, has infiltrated North American lexicon to a degree far outstripping its actual readership. Like the Bible, *The Communist Manifesto* or *The Closing of the American Mind*, *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 Fraser, the then editor of *Saturday Night* magazine, referred to Coupland as "The Dalai Lama of Generation X" (March 8-9, 1994). While not wishing to diminish the impact of Coupland upon North American popular culture—he who is regularly solicited to write for youth market magazines such as *Wired* (U.S.) and *Shift* (Canada)—it would seem premature to deify him as the voice of a generation. The slippage between *Generation X* and Coupland, while understandable, overestimates the role of the author of a tract whose time had come. Lose the title and the marginal aphorisms, and Coupland is the author of just another witty novel of contemporary youth anomie, a sort of *Shampoo Planet*, Volume 1. Coupland (and/or his publisher) showed great marketing sense by plugging his anti-commodity narrative into a sleek commodity form. This hitchhiker's guide to the new generational world-view offers the type of sound-bite wisdom which marketers and journalists require to ply their trade.

While "generation X" has taken on a life of its own, the fallout of *Generation X* spurred a small publishing boom in 1994, targeted principally to a youth audience. *The GenX Reader*, edited by Douglas

Rushkoff, is the most comprehensive volume of genX lore for one-stop shoppers. Rushkoff has assembled a collection of fiction and non-fiction pieces, including canonical tracts by writers such as Coupland and Richard Linklater and excerpts from both mainstream (i.e., *Elle*, *Rolling Stone* and *Newsweek*) and alternative (i.e., *BOING! BOING!* and the *I Hate Brenda Newsletter*) publications. To get an overview of "generation X" as discourse, *The GenX Reader* serves as a good starting point.

The most critical rendering of the "generation X" phenomenon is *Generation Ecch! The Backlash Starts Here* by Jason Cohen and Michael Krugman. What Cohen and Krugman share with Xer luminaries such as Coupland and Linklater is a wry and irreverent sense of humor, but they focus their analysis on the very texts of "generation X." Cohen and Krugman point out that the texts of "generation X," which "seem to validate conservative old fart Allan Bloom's bellyaching about the accelerating rapidity of post-TV youth and their complete lack of depth, smarts, feeling or history," serve to support contemporary moral panic about youth. While their Xer tone grows wearisome, Cohen and Krugman submit their encyclopedic knowledge of genX pop culture texts to sharp critical analysis.

A clue to the problem of generalizing X is given in one of the many provocative essays in *Next: Young American Writers on the New Generation*, edited by Eric Liu. In "Trash that Baby Boom," Ian Williams argues that "the only people willing to burn the calories to bitch in public about the perils of being directionless and apathetic possess far too much direction and gumption to come close to representing the kind they call their own." Liu's collection is wide-ranging and eclectic, with a focus on contradictory political positions and identities-in-process. Given that most genX literature is really about the contemporary ethos of white middle-class males, this collection, which is split along gender and race lines, is remarkably representative.

In his contribution to this volume, "Generation Mex," Lalo Lopez argues that there is a tendency in the white middle class cultural mainstream to speak in universal terms about things which are ultimately culturally and ethnically specific.

States Lopez:

**For the Gringorder, there's gotta be baby boomers and thirtysomethings, Generation Xers and slackers. I'd like to be a slacker, but my family would kick my ass. A poor Mexican worrying about esoteric emotions like angst? Get a job, "mijo."**

Of course, the term "generation" is imprecise at the best of times. Issues of difference, whether in terms of class, race, gender or sexuality, are systematically excluded by this generalizing term which puts everybody in the same boat. By ignoring questions of difference, the problems of disaffected white males can monopolize the cultural mainstream. On the other hand, if *Slackers* and *Generation X* are taken precisely as texts about disaffected white boys, if issues of difference are foregrounded, they can be taken as starting points for some productive analyses. Perhaps it is simply the case that the loud, protracted whine of "generation X" is an ethos shared by young white males, those very people who were socialized to expect social power and privilege to come easily.

What is the nature of this generational lament? The Christian Slater character in the movie, *Pump Up the Volume!* (1990), captures well the purported historical angst of North American youth so central to GenX lore:

**There's nothing to do anymore. Everything decent's been done. All the good themes have been used up and turned into themeparks. So I don't find it cheerful to live in the middle of a totally exhausted decade when there's nothing to look forward to and no one to look up to.**

But the Christian Slater character is not a bona fide slacker, preferring to change his conditions by orchestrating his fellow high school students to rebel against the oppressiveness of their school. *Slackers* is a film about a group of white youth, living in the late 1980s of Reagan's America, in a condition of anomie and despair. The narrative of the film lazily wanders from one youth to another:

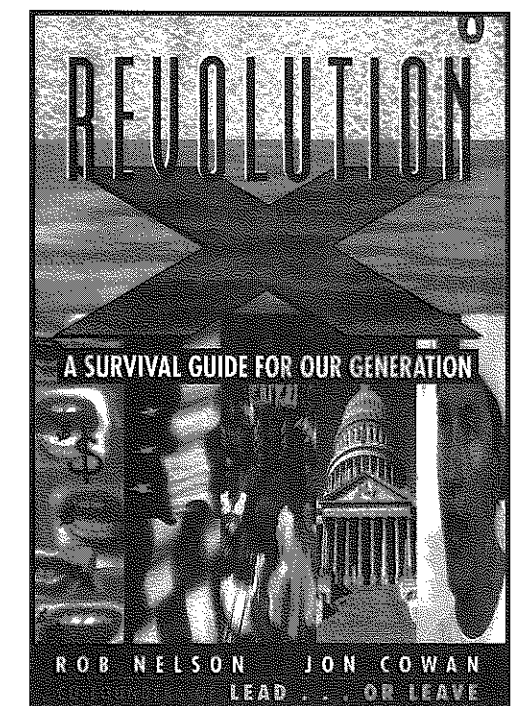
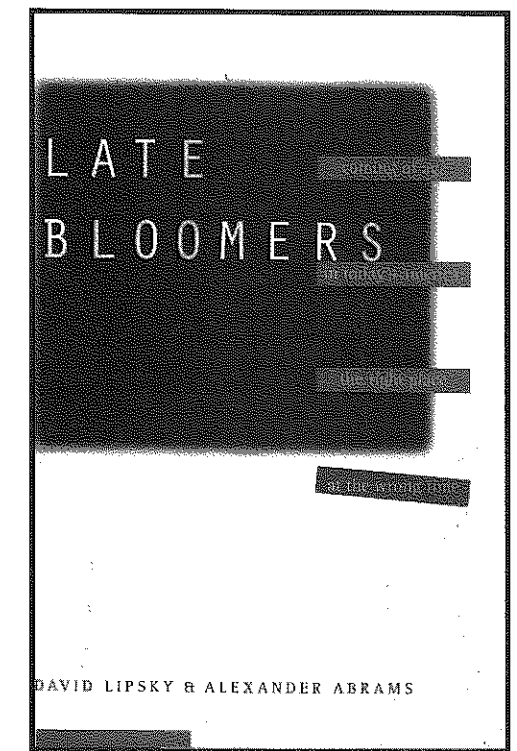
**Same old same old... just lollygagging around. Still unemployed. I'm in this band... We're the Ultimate Losers now. And, ah, the singer's still a jerk.**

Along the way, the viewer is treated to a mix of random insights which do little to explain the situation, but rather reveal pessimism and disdain.

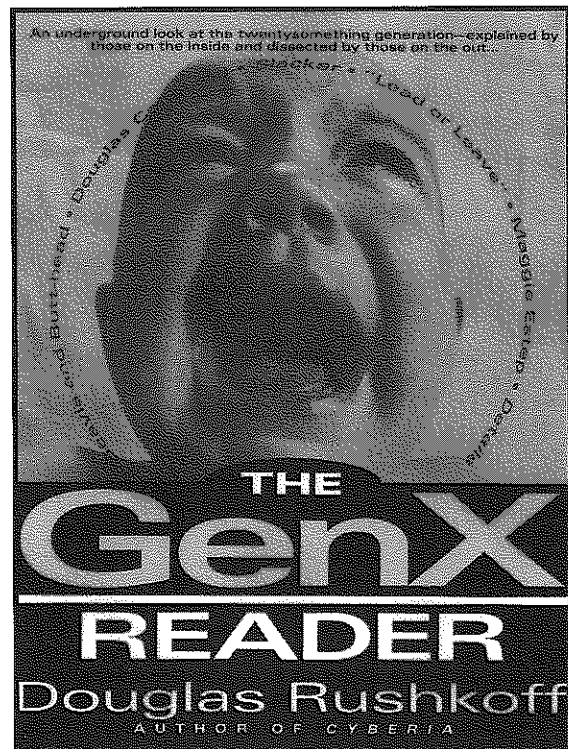
One of the most significant contributions to the generational lament of white youth—and one which reveals the gender bias of genX lore—is *Late Bloomers—Coming of Age in Today's America: The Right Place at the Wrong Time* by David Lipsky and Alexander Abrams. Perhaps the comment on the dust jacket that this book offers "constructive, non-confrontational analysis" and the pictures of two clean-cut young whites in suits should offer a warning, but nothing would quite prepare a reader for this: "Didn't we imagine that we'd have money, and houses, and families of our own, as we approached the end of our twenties? 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?" Despite the theme of lament for privilege lost, this book is loaded with research data on the new hard times for youth; nonetheless these two go-getters, worried as they are about the relative costs of a new Mustang and university tuition, seem hardly affected.

Two other energetic white boys, Rob Nelson and Jon Cowan, teamed up to write *Revolution X: A Survival Guide for Our Generation*. Nelson and Cowan, founders of the grassroots, "nonpartisan" "Lead... Or Leave" network, defy the genX stereotypes of fatalistic slackerdom to promote political engagement on the part of U.S. youth. They take aim at important social issues of the day such as the environment, crime and the debt; they attribute the latter to U.S. military spending, tax breaks to the rich and "middle-class welfare." They espouse a contradictory politics congruent with a middle-class life-style that buys into the material benefits of mainstream culture without completely selling itself out:

**No fire hoses, tear gas, police dogs, or riots. Let's face it: Most of us aren't looking for unnecessary confrontation. A generation that reads *Details* and *Spin*, watches "Melrose Place," "Seinfeld," and "The Simpsons," and waits in line for the StairMaster after work is probably not going to be taking to**



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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.

*Revolution 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 hipper and more street wise than *Late Bloomers*, it is cut from the same cloth. While Lipsky and Abrams might vote Republican, Nelson's and Cowan's "post-partisan" revolution is content to get youth out to the ballot box, presumably to vote Democrat.

The problem with *Slackers* and *Generation X*, to name the two most influential renderings of the North American post-Fordist generation, is that they substitute anthropological and literary insight

ation X" appears to be falling into dis-favour. If there was ever a subcultural moment associated with it, its bricoleurs have moved on to new, more fertile terrain. To his credit, Coupland won't answer a question with the phrase "generation X" in it. And advertising executives, ever the perceptive ethnographers, are searching for new answers. Already in the spring of 1994, a Coca-Cola marketing executive, Sergio Zyman, asserted that "Generation X came. It took a few breaths. And it went. Generation X doesn't exist—and barely ever did" (*Toronto Star*, March 21, 1994). As if to punctuate the end of an era, the news emerged barely three weeks later that "generation X" had a martyr, Kurt Cobain, who left behind him a legacy of pain and torment.

If the New York publishers, who were in the process of unleashing a small "generation X" publishing boom, feared they had missed the boat, they didn't let on. *The GenX Reader*, *Generation Ecch!*, *Next*, *Late Bloomers* and *Revolution X* arrived and departed quietly from bookstore

**"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 genXers are in a unique position to reconsider the down sides of "free-market" capitalism, their spokespersons have rushed to characterize them as shallow, apathetic social drop-outs. The fall-out of this new mythos has been a string of lamentable movies; aggressive fast-paced ad campaigns produced by an industry bewildered by Coupland's claim that "we are not a target market"; the appropriation by the music, television and fashion industries of grunge rock and fashion as a kind of ur-moment of the whole phenomenon; and the emergence of Seattle as a new cultural mecca, a San Francisco of the 90s.

As the 90s wear on, however, "gener-

shelves. Despite its bring-back-the-80s ethos of individualism and greed, it was *Late Bloomers* that attracted some critical attention, thanks to a pre-publication excerpt in *Harper's* (July 1994). Lipsky and Abrams presented some media analysis which showed that, until 1990, major newspapers and magazines had portrayed youth as confident, ambitious, determined, fiercely self-reliant and even "older than they used to be." Suddenly, in 1990, this all changed. *Time* published a cover story entitled "Proceeding With Caution" which characterized youth as paralyzed shirkers, who were "overly sensitive at best and lazy at worst" and for whom "second best seems just fine." *Fortune*, which had

## Border/Lines is Your Alternative.

lauded young people in the late 80s, promptly adopted this same tone. To explain this editorial shift, Lipsky and Abrams pointed out that 1 million jobs were lost to youth between May 1990 and May 1991. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, they asked whether the new editorial stance on youth was an act of "unconscious kindness"; "after all, if we had never cared about careers and material success, it would be less disturbing for us—and for the country—when we didn't achieve them."

While Lipsky and Abrams perceptively demonstrate the impact of a changing economy on youth in general and on the discourse of youth in particular, their book shows that they are principally concerned about how that changing economy would squelch their own material aspirations. Nonetheless, to begin to answer the question of what was "generation X," the impact of a changing economy on youth must be foregrounded. But, given the malleability of the term "youth," and given the gender and ethnicity of most of the genX pundits, the question that follows is which "youth" are we talking about? As Leslie Savan writes in *The Village Voice*: "there's no Malcolm X in Generation X—except when an ad is deliberately "multi-cultural"; the X of the media mind means almost entirely grungy white youth" (August 24, 1993). To test this hypothesis, take a careful look at the current Molson "I am Canadian" campaign, which borrows all the elements of U.S. genX ads.

"Generation X," as a cultural phenomenon, corresponded to a great extent to a period of mourning of young white males who had been socialized to expect easy access to privilege and power, even if only the middle-class American Dream; today even that seems almost unattainable. While the economic conditions that gave rise to "generation X" are shared by all youth, those naming and being named by the phenomenon were predominantly white and male. The texts that they created or in which they were represented reflect that fact.

## OISE/UT

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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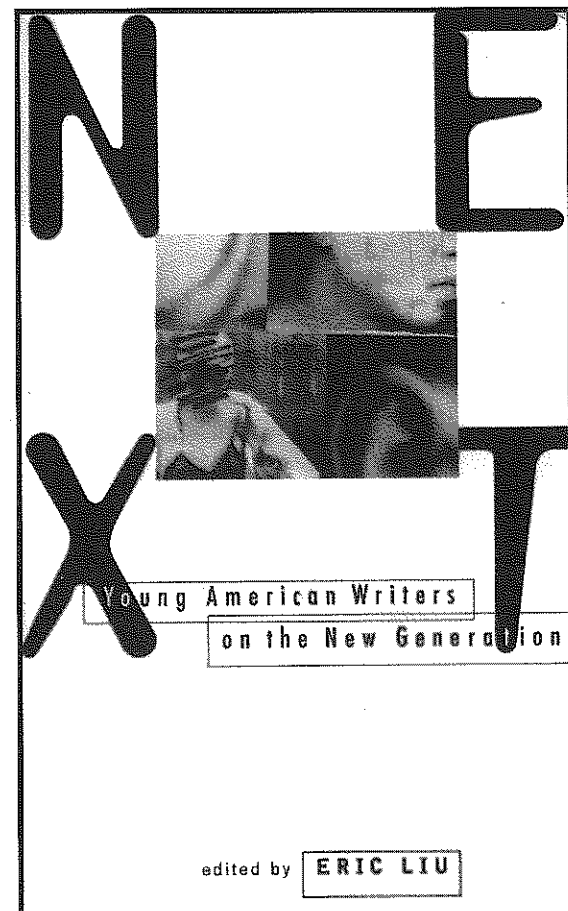
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When OISE merges with the University's Faculty of Education to become OISE/UT in July 1996 it is expected that most faculty members will contribute to both graduate and pre-service teacher education programs. This appointment will be at the rank of Assistant or Associate Professor depending on qualifications and experience. The expected starting date is July 1, 1996 or as can be arranged, and is subject to budget approval.

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Malcolm A. Levin  
Assistant Director (Academic)  
Ref.: 3/5/77  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
252 Bloor Street West, Suite 11-126  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6

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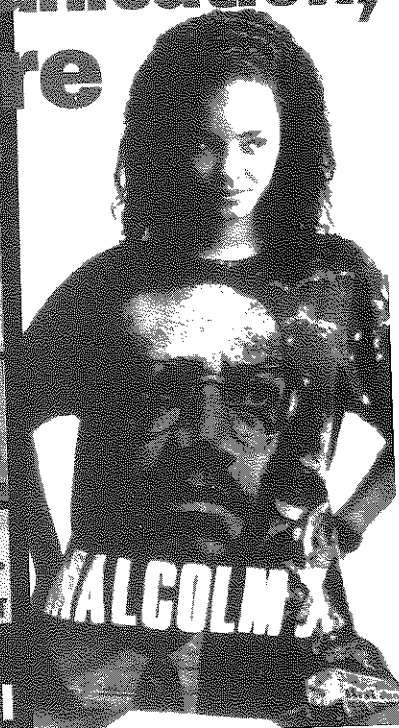


# media, communication, culture

A GLOBAL APPROACH



James Lull



Stephanie Grant, *The Passion of Alice*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.

The premise of this novel - an anorexic falling in love with a bulimic - supplants the gambit of the movie, *Proof*-a blind photographer taking incriminating pictures-as having the catchiest "hook" off all late twentieth century narratives. *The Passion of Alice*, a first novel, is somewhat rough-hewn. Regardless, it importantly avoids two traps: undigested treatment-centre realism or schematic *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* symbolism. The novel compellingly mixes horror and comedy, insight and voyeuristic fare. About anorexics the narrator offers the following:

**"People think that anorexics imagine ourselves fat and diet away invisible flab. But people are afraid of the truth: we prefer ourselves this way, boiled-down bone, essence. My favorite cooking metaphor (unfortunate perhaps) applies: not reduce, clarify. I know exactly what I look like, without hyperbole. Every inch of skin, each muscle, each bone."**

Also dispassionately, Alice recounts bulimic Maeve's rationale for throwing up in handbags instead of toilets:

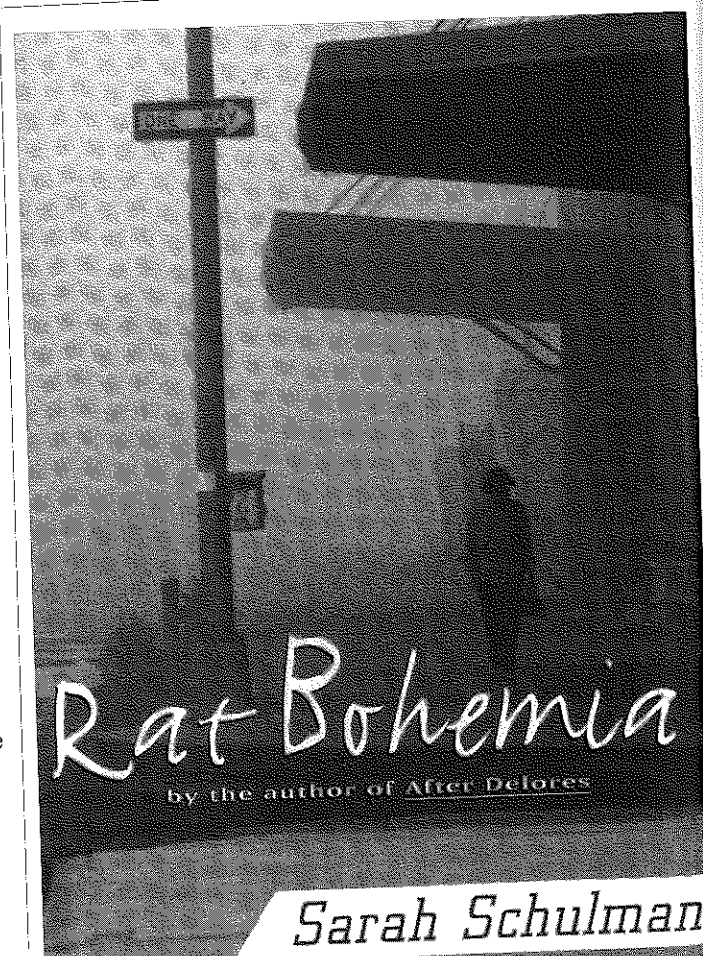
B/L LIST

**"I got tired of putting my face where other people shit," she said. "It was giving me low self-esteem."**

Although the title hints at religion (the passion) and fable (Alice), 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 *longueurs* for the reader. /S.F.

James Lulle, *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

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 plodding chapters, an extensive chapter on the movement(s) of culture in an era of economic globalization is worth the price of admission. (Lulle introduces some vocabulary for dealing with culture going global: deterritorialization, transculturation and reterritorialization). While this is not the best introduction to Latin American cultural theory, Lulle weaves the ideas of Jesus Martin-Barbero, Nestor Garcia Canclini and others seamlessly into his arguments, without patting himself on the back for some subplot of "discovery." /M.H.



Charles R. Acland, *Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of "Youth in Crisis."* Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

Given the growing hysteria over violent youth crime in Canada, Acland's detailed study of media coverage of a "preppy murder" in New York's Central Park is a very worthwhile read. Acland contextualizes his analysis of this case in a broader discussion of representations of youth in film, on television and in academic work to provide a framework for understanding the place of youth, and youthful excess, in popular discourse. This book is well-written, theoretically astute and politically significant. /M.H.

Sarah Schulman, *Rat Bohemia*. New York: Dutton, 1995.

The words of this novel-like those of the title-quirkily do and don't go together. As *de rigueur* as a reference to a Gregg Araki film and as conventional as a desire for "daddy," the components of *Rat Bohemia* also do and don't mesh. Deliberately, queer and straight don't mix, or at least they co-exist awkwardly here. Schulman jams the machinery that produces seamless fiction by giving three characters-two lesbians and a gay male (who dies of AIDS)-differentiated and wry-comic-pathetic monologues. The novel closes, curiously but aptly, with a "closeted" lesbian's narrative that marks the limits-in a hetero-oriented culture-of gay speak, of queer culture.

Schulman's New York-a city often constructed in literature-also reads sharply, uniquely. It's a queer space that un-writes, say, Paul Auster's or Jay McInerney's "big city." /S.F.

*Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed. Ivo Kamps. London and New York: Verso Books, 1995.

*Materialist Shakespeare: A History* is not a history. Though conceived as such and organized chronologically from '77 to '94, 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 broad range of materialist practices in Shakespeare studies."

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

*Materialist Shakespeare* has lots of intriguing, important, and difficult ideas, but only Kamps' introduction and Fredric Jameson's afterword are new. So why republish articles already available in prominent 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 assurances 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, passed off as history, about the "meteoric rise" of materialist criticism and its "ascendancy . . . in Great Britain and the United States." In effect, readers are offered power, the power of being "where it's at" in the academies of the old empire and the new.

Although the packaging of the thirteen essays that make up this volume is irritating, what's in the package is worthwhile. The essays work against the grain of Shakespeare criticism by challenging customary assumptions and readings, the most disruptive being Alan Sinfield's on *Macbeth*; Walter Cohen's on *The Merchant of Venice*; Michael Bristol's on the "consoling and anaesthetic explanations" of *Othello*. Bristol concludes that "*Othello* is a text of racial and sexual persecution." Lynda E. Boose reads the "silenced history of women's silencing" in *The Taming of the Shrew*. For others, such as John Drakakis and Graham Holderness, not only early-modern, but also modern and postmodern, social history plays in and through the plays on the page, stage, and screen. Together the contributors to *Materialist Shakespeare* demonstrate the ideological clout of Shakespeare and, as such, his abiding usefulness. /T.M.

Reviews by Stanley Fogel, Michael Hoehsmann and Ted McGee.

## B/L List

