

DANIEL T. O'HARA

# EMPIRE BURLESQUE

The Fate of Critical Culture

in Global America

# **EMPIRE BURLESQUE**



**NEW AMERICANISTS**

*A Series Edited by Donald E. Pease*

**EMPIRE BURLESQUE**

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## PREFACE



Five of the eleven chapters of this book were written during a study leave in 2000. Four of the remaining chapters were substantially revised since their original journal publication in the 1990s. And the other two previously published book chapters have been significantly revised so that they may better articulate this book's critical argument. This process was a painfully protracted gestation. Two developments contributed to this fact. The first, more personal one was becoming chair of my department for four years (1995–1999). Some of those experiences find their way into this book as object lessons. The other, more impersonal development was the final collapse of the Cold War national-security welfare state and its so-called liberal ideology and the sudden emergence, still in process, of a global horizon for the United States and its institutions. One consequence of such events for this book was that its extended writing became virtually a process of divination, that is, a quest to read "the signs of the times" in order to discover a possible future for liberal American culture and the profession of literary studies. In other words, I read "events" as they interacted in the last decade as if they were what Harold Bloom first called, with reference to the experience of poetry, "scenes of instruction," from which we may learn the history of the imagination to come. Will it survive, and how?



Such is the question still informing all the chapters of this book. If this sounds as though I still hope to believe in the prophetic function of literature and criticism, this is a correct judgment.

Such a focus explains the occasional origins of several chapters. Writing about Frank Lentricchia's decision in the mid-1990s to give up criticism and become a writer of memoir and fiction, or about Freud after a controversial Library of Congress exhibition in 1997, or about Henry James for the 150th anniversary celebration in 1993 of his birth at New York University—such occasions and their aftermaths afforded me vantage points on the emergence of the processes we now term “globalizing literary studies,” in the context of this prophetic hope.

This book works analytically on several different levels at once. It is a *description* of the debilitating effects of globalization on the university in general and the field of literary studies in particular. It is a *critique* of literary studies' embrace of globalization theory in the name of a blind and vacant modernization. It is a *meditation* on the ways in which critical reading (and writing) can facilitate an ethical alternative to such institutionalized practices of modernization. More specifically, it is a psychoanalytic *diagnosis* of the globalization of American studies in terms of the New Americanists' abjection and transference, their habitual modernizing “bandwagon” mentality, regardless of consequences. Consequently, this book is as much a critical *parody* of globalization as an analysis of it. In this respect, *Empire Burlesque* resembles my last book, *Radical Parody: American Culture and Critical Agency after Foucault* (1992). The term “radical parody” describes the position or style that the parodist shares with others by virtue of a network of professional and cultural identifications, conscious and otherwise. *Empire Burlesque* thus targets aspects of the critic's own mode of scholarly production. This book, in short, is “ungrounded,” as it supplements comically the culture and profession it takes as its immediate conditions of possibility. Such a radical contingency of reading, for better or worse, is this book's critical practice.

The critical history and cultural theory informing *Empire Burlesque*, as the introduction elaborates, argue that in the field of American studies, it was the transference from the Cold War national focus to an international global framework that resulted in the Americanists' self-abjection. This double movement of de-identification and displacement from one's cultural locale completed the process of abjection of academic Americanists

begun by the challenges from within of multiculturalism. Globalization entails a transition from a heavily invested national narrative to quasi-anonymous tales of displacement and departure without returns, the literary critical simulacra of the geopolitically and economically driven migrations around the world. Every element of the Cold War national security state and its liberal welfare culture underwent negative transformation. This book terms the ironic imperial outcome of these complex differential processes “global America.” Global America names the totalizing fetish whose claims to unity are predicated on denying the differences that it cannot subsume under its logics of representation, cultural and professional. As the global marketplace outsourced the military-industrial complex to more profitable locales, the manufacturing and professional meritocratic bases of upward mobility for the ethnic hierarchies of former immigrant populations suffered downgrading and displacements by new technologies and the new workforces being groomed for them here and, especially, abroad. The globalization of the academy—its new canon of texts, its hot topics for discussion at conferences and for publication, its targeted audiences, its slicker international means of production and distribution—has positioned the literary scholar within a space for which the American empire serves as the horizon of future possibilities. In cultivating a renewed taste for critical reading within such a new cultural space, this book represents a comprehensive attempt to check the flights from the professional and cultural situation characteristic of the contemporary scene. The turn to ethics this book envisions arises precisely in this context when the critic, in the contingency of reading, has to recognize his or her education by the text being read as the text’s aporias are themselves recognized. The critic’s work of reading thereby creates an ethical figure that has not been accommodated to empire but is the shadowy alterity at the heart of its globalizing order, its bad conscience, so to speak.

In its reading of canonical and uncanonical writers and cultural figures, whether Henry James, Freud, Said, Mankind (aka Mick Foley, a former professional wrestler with a literary bent), or Cordwainer Smith (a classic sci-fi writer of the 1950s and early 1960s whose real name was Paul Linebarger and whose real job, besides being a professor of Asian studies at Johns Hopkins, was working in the Far East for Army Intelligence), *Empire Burlesque* provides examples of the kind of aesthetico-ethical criticism that globalization would appear to have superseded. This

book thereby enacts a desire to construct an ethos that would resist this mode of critical performance. That an ironic Cold War sci-fi writer so perfectly anticipates the mind-set of globalization is a scene of instruction to reckon with, as this book attempts to turn the profession toward the spectacle of its own self-burlesque, so as to shock it back into its sense of ethical responsibility.

The deconstructive theories of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man find their analytic place here at this point in the book's argument. The catachrestic figure of "global America" is at once the American empire and its spectral double. Beyond the global processes of displacement and abjection, radical parody and self-burlesque, this book uses de Man's late work on a material sublime (on how "to see as the poets see") to critique the representational aesthetics of modernity. Derrida's recent Levinasian-inflected work on justice and human rights, in combination with his Benjaminian speculations on Marxism's "messianic promise," clears the ground for an imagination of a different future for American studies, one other than the return in reality of what has been symbolically foreclosed. This different future, more generally for U.S. literary and cultural studies, is in particular to be hospitable to all the others, with their futures, who would still have been arriving right now, including the others in ourselves.

The chapters in part 1, "Reading as a Vanishing Act," look at the fate of reading as a critical practice in recent criticism. They argue that under the reigning New Historicist dogmas of multiculturalist identity politics, its greatest proponent (Edward W. Said) fails to understand its academic successes (chapter 1, "Edward W. Said and the Fate of Critical Culture"); its theoretical model gets seriously mistaken (chapter 2, "Why Foucault No Longer Matters"); and its bad-faith, self-congratulatory academic politics have driven Frank Lentricchia, arguably the leading literary critic of his generation, out of the business of criticism and into writing not only caustic memoir but also savage fiction (chapter 3, "Lentricchia's Frankness and the Place of Literature").

Part 2, "Globalizing Literary Studies," examines the theoretical, ethical, and institutional effects of the transformation of American critical identity under the impact of recent geopolitical, ideological, and economic developments. Unless and until U.S. criticism learns to read itself as potentially innovative, it will become, more than it ever was before,

subject to marginalization, to a kind of social death (chapter 4, “Re-designing the Lessons of Literature”). Even when critics have attempted to argue for an ethical basis underlying the aesthetics of critical reading (as chapter 5, “The Return to Ethics and the Specter of Reading,” shows), they have too often substituted slogans and sound bites for close analysis of texts. As chapter 6, “Class in a Global Light: The Two Professions,” spells out in some detail, the profession can ill afford the luxury of its moral and political posturings. It is already a self-divided profession, radically split along class lines, and unless it changes its ways, it will suffer reduction entirely to the service function of instructing the offspring of global elites in the niceties of communication.

To further this goal of self-critique, the chapters in part 3, “Analyzing Global America,” propose, first, to experiment with the language of Derrida’s recent Levinasian-inflected work on a deconstructive ethics (chapter 7, “Transference and Abjection: An Analytic Parable”). Chapter 8, “Ghostwork: An Uncanny Prospect for New Americanists,” then proposes to envision a thought experiment, to stage an uncanny encounter between Freud’s late theories of the cultural superego and a deconstructive reading of the New Americanist project. The ultimate “bad conscience” par excellence of New Historicist orthodoxy is, of course, Paul de Man, and in chapter 9, “Specter of Theory,” it is to his critical theory, especially in its late manifestations, that I urge us now to turn, a spectral turning already begun in the previous two chapters.

The last part of this book, “Reading Worlds,” consists of two long chapters. The first of these, “Empire Baroque: Becoming Other in Henry James,” was originally written in the winter of 1992–1993 for two events scheduled for June 1993, the two-week-long 150th birthday celebration for Henry James at New York University, and the twentieth anniversary “New Americanist” conference for the international journal of literature and culture *boundary 2* at Dartmouth College. Portions of this text were read at both events. It has been much revised, updated, and expanded since then, especially with respect to the New Historicist turn in James studies and a recently proposed New Americanist pedagogy for teaching “the other Henry James,” that is, the multicultural Henry James. In many respects, chapter 10 most fully puts into practice my theoretical analysis of reading as an ethics of and for criticism.

The final chapter, “Planet Buyer and the Catmaster: A Critical Future

for Transference” explores two short tales and one short novel. The first tale, “Minor Heroism: Something about My Father,” is by Allan Gurganus. As read, it represents the ambiguous—and ambivalent—triumph (or what I call “abject felicity”) of multiculturalism *avant le lettre*, indeed, virtually its apotheosis, as foreseen, ironically, by Gurganus in 1973. Similarly, the second tale, “The Burning of the Brain,” and the novel, *Nostrilia*, science fictions by Cordwainer Smith, published in 1958 and 1966, respectively, envision a critical future for transference phenomena that is apocalyptic in its excruciating intensities and cosmic in its prophetic scope. That Gurganus is a Left-oriented gay writer and Smith a Cold War critical humanist and Army Intelligence operative only makes their unexpected agreement on multicultural identity politics in their then emergent institutional forms all the more important, I think, as scenes of instruction for us today.

Finally, I need here to take note formally of the conceptual and discursive intermixing in this book. Just as Foucault and Derrida, Jon Elster and Lacan, Marx and Levinas, and so on interpenetrate the theoretical space of the book in improvised, hybrid associations, so too, at the level of style and genre, *Empire Burlesque*, in deploying essay, analysis, memoir, parody, parable, allegory, and, of course, burlesque, more than lives up to its name. Whether this is a weakness or a strength of mine, or of the cultural moment, is a critical judgment I must leave for others to make as they read the book.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



All or substantial portions of chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10 have appeared in earlier versions in *Reconstructing Foucault: Essays in the Wake of the 80s*, ed. Ricardo Miguel-Alonso and Silvia Caporale-Bizzini (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994); *boundary 2, Annals of Scholarship, Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2d ed., ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*, ed. Theo D'haen and Haris Bertens (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995). I am grateful to the publishers and editors of these publications for permission to reprint these now revised essays in their new context.

I want to thank the two readers of the manuscript from Duke University Press. Their constructive criticisms and helpful suggestions, I trust, have made this a much better book. I must also thank Donald E. Pease Jr., the editor of Duke's "New Americanists" series, and the press's executive editor, J. Reynolds Smith. Their invaluable work has made this book possible in its present form in every way. The critical history and cultural theory that I discuss here in my own way is largely indebted to Pease's published and unpublished work. I really cannot express my gratitude well enough. For an example of his most important recently published work, see Donald E. Pease, "C. L. R. James's *Mariners, Renegades, and*

*Castaways and the World We Live In*,” which serves as the introduction to C. L. R. James’s *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001).

Finally, I offer this book as my memorial to the spirit of my father, Daniel J. O’Hara, who died in July 1996.

## INTRODUCTION

We Welcoming Others, or What's

Wrong with the Global Point of View?



Suppose someone said to you, “empire burlesque”; what would you think? Perhaps the first thing to come into your mind would not be “the fate of critical culture in global America.” In the following pages, I will try to justify why you should make the connection between this book’s title and its subtitle.

I admit that “empire burlesque” in itself is a curious phrase. On its face, it consists of two nouns. Given the usual expectations of standard English syntax, the first noun in any such phrase functions automatically as an adjectival modifier. “Empire burlesque” would then mean a kind of burlesque, as if there could be a “republic” or “democracy” burlesque, too, or if it could be an analogue of a furniture style.

“Burlesque” is a term, however, that could refer to a place, as well as to a type of show. “Empire burlesque” could then be construed as the name of a theater where, presumably, a “higher,” grander, more sophisticated, more international style of show would occur. This potential meaning would be inherently ironic, not to say paradoxical, since “burlesque,” as one recent edition of a literary handbook puts it, is traditionally considered a “low” form of comedy “characterized by ridiculous exaggeration and distortion,” in which “the sublime may be made absurd, honest emotions may be turned to sentimentality, and a serious subject may be



treated frivolously or a frivolous subject seriously.”<sup>1</sup> As the handbook goes on to say, “the essential quality that makes for burlesque is the often raucous discrepancy between subject matter and style” (72). The nonsensical and the dignified in content and form are repeatedly mismatched with each other to the point of total confusion. One may think of the classic radio comedy bit, for example, Abbott and Costello’s “Who’s On First?”, which has its origins in burlesque in which a passionate earnestness and a routine self-evidence get all mixed up with increasingly hilarious consequences.

Whether “burlesque” is taken in a broad fashion as a potential variation of meaning haunting literature and the other arts at every turn depending on the dubious adequacy of form and content to each other, or in a more restricted sense as a popular form of entertainment in which comedians tell risqué jokes and perform outrageous, often topical skits while big-bosomed women strip off their fetishistic outfits slowly to a honky-tonk bump-and-grind beat, burlesque is clearly related to parody and travesty. Parody is usually restricted to making fun of a particular work or style. Travesty is often what burlesque does to the pompous but secretly abject subject, such as the supposed sacredness of womanhood or the idealized purity of differences—class, gender, racial, or whatever. But burlesque actually takes in entire worlds or epochs for its objects of fun, with great comic effect when lampooning the social and moral and rhetorical contradictions and hypocrisies of some upper-class model or form of life. The English music hall tradition of comedy as it morphs into Monty Python in the team’s send-up of the life of Christ in their great film *Life of Brian* is the best recent example of what I have in mind.

However, there are “high” or elite literary examples, as well. “Book Ninth” of Henry James’s novel *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) opens with its male protagonist, Merton Densher, sitting in his Venice rooms as if in “his own theatre, in his single person,” repeatedly rehearsing the fresh details of his sexual conquest of his manipulative lover, Kate Croy.<sup>2</sup> The terms of this rehearsal, a renewed “hallucination of intimacy” between lovers, with a “perpetual orchestra . . . playing low and slow,” “the fiddlers” underscored in his fantasy, all suggest the gross vulgarity of a solitary act that undercuts Densher’s sense of relational potency and so calls into question the fragile presumptions of his social world (400). Similarly, the class doubleness in

which “high” and “low” cultures shadow each other is the specter of burlesque haunting the global order now emerging.

This is why, in “empire burlesque,” we can also hear, if we listen hard enough, with sufficiently ironic a spirit, the parodic echo of a Miltonic inversion, as if what the title travestied were an imperial world to be submitted to the burlesque treatment in more detail, or perhaps even an empire in the process of burlesquing itself, wittingly or not. (That Bob Dylan titles his 1985 album *Empire Burlesque* might underscore such a possibility.) In any event, what I mean by it is that newly emerged global scene of instruction in which American critical identity, informed (and misinformed) by ideas, theories, literatures, cultures, and other realities “elsewhere” (as well as “here”), is now being (re)formed and performed with a growing frequency and influence as if it were the ultimate horizon of experience. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the massacre in Tiananmen Square, both events of 1989, the profession of American criticism in the widest sense—including academia, journalism, and the other media and policy-shaping institutions—has shifted its focus from a largely internal (internal to these professions) multicultural ethos in a New Historicist mode to the economic, political, and cultural processes of globalization. In the global perspective of these national and international institutions (of the university, the media, and intellectual and humanitarian foundations), American critical identity is enacting itself, as in a place or theater, as part of a traveling show (of conferences, theories, readings, memoirs, and publishing ventures), in which all the would-be emperors have, progressively, no clothes.

“Empire,” of course, is a term that refers to a political reality, a set of political institutions and organizations of life, an imperial world system. Does empire in this sense exist literally now? Even according to its most systematic theorists, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in their book *Empire*, its political manifestations or materializations are at best nascent and intermittent at the moment, largely limited to administrative, police, and humanitarian operations. While not nothing, these realizations of empire are not yet empire in the traditional sense. Given the power of the telecommunications industry, the rise of the Internet, and the emergence of the new tech-based economy, the postmodern form of empire may perhaps remain mostly virtual, except for projects and operations, scenes

of instruction and events of entertainment. However that may be, empire, whether virtual or not, whether “straight” or “burlesque,” appears to be the economic and cultural horizon of our lives to come on the planet.<sup>3</sup>

My theoretical take on the formation and operation of this global perspective on American critical identity as “empire burlesque” derives largely from Jacques Derrida’s later work, especially *Specters of Marx* and related texts. In *Aporias*, for one example, Derrida demonstrates in a careful reading of Heidegger’s “being-toward-death,” the keystone of his existential analysis in *Being and Time*, that any attempt to found empirical and historical disciplines of knowledge on a priori foundations by means of establishing secure and inviolate borders, is doomed to failure. This is so even as all empirical and historical disciplines or knowledges presuppose one or another ontological pre-understanding that necessarily informs the nature and scope of their investigations, no matter how much they feign ignorance (or the self-evidence), for disciplinary purposes, of all such transcendental speculations: “While the richest or most necessary [anthropological knowledge] cannot found itself in any other way than on presuppositions that do not belong to [such knowledge or its competence] . . . conversely, this fundamental [system of presuppositions or ontology] cannot protect itself from a hidden [anthropological] contamination.”<sup>4</sup> This deconstructive version of the hermeneutic circle is more radical than any existential one, since the intermixing between the realms of transcendental presupposition and that of empirical field “data” founds both realms on uncertain, not to say undecidable, bases. In this ironic way, theory does direct practice, even as practice always already—that is, in an a priori manner—infiltrates any theory’s core. Such structural indetermination, which promotes a radical overdetermination, is the ultimate aporia or impasse of intellectual work, which can only be suffered or survived, lived on from repeatedly.

Although the wordplay in the last paragraph may sound like the philosophical equivalent of a burlesque comic’s routine, it does have a serious point. Derrida is conceptualizing the limits of any structure in terms of its finitude, when facing the always imminent prospect of death. Structural finitude is an analogy for and an instance of human finitude. Any structure of thinking, including that inherent in material and cultural institutions and discourses, possesses a “ground-and-supplement” orga-

nization in which, at certain points or moments, the differences between this division or partition or borderline blur into one another, intermixing. These places of structural “mortality” (or entropy) are sites where a potentially infinite reflection on itself haunts the structure. This is the so-called *mise en abîme* effect. “Empire burlesque” is my name for this effect as it haunts, comically, the emerging structure of global American literature and culture. The low-life vulgarity that shadows Morton Densher’s fantasy space is class and sexually specific, but those contingent dimensions depend on this structural peculiarity that transforms even James’s empire baroque into our empire burlesque.

One of the explicit consequences of such a condition is that every concept, trope, or figure, every argument or system, gives off the traces of what it would exclude, what it must attempt to exclude, in order to order itself. Spectral lineaments of all these “others” haunt our most “positive” constructions. Our conceptual and rhetorical entities are thus never able to be “identical to themselves, hence no longer simply identifiable, and to that extent no longer determinable. Such totalities [can] therefore no longer authorize simple inclusions of a part in the whole” (7). Nation-states, even would-be global empires, share with intellectual entities this indeterminable and radically intermixed quality or conditionality, necessarily transgressing their own self-declared borders. Deconstruction, in this sense, is the rhetoric of such phantom excess, of such excessive spectral expenditure; it is, in this way, the ironic rhetoric of empire, empire’s self-divided shadow, since empire would expend itself excessively, totally, if it could do so, in every moment, since exceeding all borders defines the principle of its paradoxical order, what Derrida calls its principle of self-ruin.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, that is, in my own words once again, empire is a priori its own burlesque; it is itself and its self-travestying double or alter ego or spectral other. We can see this phenomenon in the way American professions, with their celebrity mystique, and service industries, with their proletarian professionalism, are joining hands as if they are their own mirror images. We can also see it in the abjection of everyday American life simultaneously appearing with the transference of wealth and value to the diverse processes of globalization. This critical transference gets played out in the brutal low-life antics of popular culture, particularly in the latest form of “bread and circuses,” professional wrestling, or in the

passions of the memoir genre and other kinds of self-writing and the tacky self-revelations of the Jerry Springer-type talk show.

Shadowed by its spectral other (and double), by its alter ego, as it were, an intellectual entity, whether concept, trope, or law, both defines a field, a figure, or a domain and transgresses its own limits, trespassing on the spectral thresholds of other such entities, locales, or “places.” The now notorious global flows of high finance and cultural representations are just two of the latest (and best) examples of this strangely ubiquitous “immaterializing” work, this “ghost” work.<sup>6</sup>

So when I speak of intellectual entities such as “American critical identity” or “a global perspective,” I am aware of the inherent paradoxical limitations of such generalizing phrases. They are at once too determinate and also overdetermined, contradictorily open to a plurality of differences. Nonetheless, conceptual, rhetorical, and institutional realities make it necessary for a critic to form one identity, one perspective, even if it is not intended to be taken as the only one possible. Such moments of identity formation (and reformation) define critical generations in a profession.

Of course, literary studies, or more broadly English studies, whether amalgamated officially or not with comparative literature or cultural studies, and whether associated closely with contemporary media or not, in short, “our profession” (broadly speaking), appears not to be doing too well in reproducing itself from one generation to another without suffering traumatic deprofessionalizing changes affecting the processes of institutional renewal.<sup>7</sup> I do not wish to recite here the vicissitudes of our profession; you will hear enough of that in the pages to follow, although far less than in previous books of mine.<sup>8</sup> Owing, in large part, to Derrida’s later work, I have learned to begin (with) welcoming others.

If Derrida is right and every intellectual entity, including geopolitical representations, hosts its double/other, playing host to, and being the guest of, this guest, even its hostage, then what? Then, a spectral trace disseminates and haunts with its invisible but palpable mark every text, archive, or topology. Such haunting is virtually what Derrida names, after a usage of Hélène Cixous, the *arrivant*. This *arrivant* is the absolute other ever to come. Death, “my death,” as the impossible possibility totally mine, paradoxically embodies this specter of the *arrivant*.<sup>9</sup> The “death” or “passing” of every entity of representation is then inscribed at the core

of each word as the spectral trace of radical alterity. The figure of the absolute *arrivant*, the ever first and last comer, is what Derrida sees in the immigrant, the émigré, the political exile, the migrant worker (we may also say, with justice, “the gypsy scholar”). This is why Odysseus, the Wandering Jew, and various other errant figures of nomadic hybridity haunt the following passage (from *Aporias*) as avatars of this “messianicity without messianism”:<sup>10</sup>

No, I am talking about the absolute *arrivant*, who is not even a guest. He who surprises the host—who is not yet a host or an inviting power—enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families and genealogies. The absolute *arrivant* does not yet have a name or an identity. It is not an invader or an occupier, nor is it a colonizer, even if it can also become one. It is not even a foreigner identified as a member of a foreign, determined community. Since the *arrivant* does not have any identity yet, its place of arrival is also de-identified: one does not yet know or one no longer knows which is the country, the place, the nation, the family, the language, and the home in general that welcomes the absolute *arrivant*. This absolute *arrivant* as such is, however, not an intruder, an invader, or a colonizer, because invasion presupposes some self-identity for the aggressor and for the victim. Nor is the *arrivant* a legislator or the discoverer of a promised land. (33–34)

An amazing, if somewhat mystifying, passage. So many echoes and traces shimmer and pass here that one does not know quite what to comment on. What appears next in the passage, however, is clearly the ghost of the infant messiah:

As disarmed as a newly born child, [the absolute *arrivant*] no more commands than is commanded by the memory of some originary event when the archaic is bound with the final extremity, with the finality par excellence of the *telos* or of the *escathaton*. It even exceeds the Border of any determinable promise. . . . this border [where one cannot discriminate] among the figures of the *arrivant*, the deal, and the *revenant* (the ghost, he, she, or that which returns). (34–35)

A monstrous birth for this spectral messiah, one probably occurring in a dressing room of the empire burlesque? Thinking of the future, in(to) futurity, appears to take such a rough form.

Derrida's far-from-mystical but openly visionary point is that an order constitutes itself by excluding what appear to be radically heterogeneous elements, which nonetheless also continue to exist both within and without the order, on both sides of its borders, in vestigial forms of emergent traces of what is really not present there now or at any other moment yet promising ever to come still. Such a structural order of spectral traces surviving, living on, is a decentered and decentering order. It is significantly marginal, even as it is self-exceeding, multiple and yet empirelike, a kind of ersatz counterimperial simulacrum haunting every material project of empire with its burlesque mirror image. This shadowy alterity at the heart of any positive order is what Derrida calls the absolute *arrivant* and what I am calling, with respect to American critical identity in a global perspective, "empire burlesque."

Let me give two examples, one scientific and the other geopolitical. It is now a commonplace of modern physics to discuss quantum mechanics as a supplement of classical Newtonian and Einsteinian physics that has special applications to the realm of subatomic particles. This development would suggest that classical mechanics and quantum mechanics are the ground and supplement, respectively, in the organization of the theoretical structure of modern physics. But we also now know that the laws operating at the subatomic level and those at the cosmic scale intermix at high energies, so that the neat division between realms breaks down, as in our experiments we must take into account both the subatomic effects of our own instruments on transformation and detection and the classical features, such as gravity, in our increasingly radical experiments. This "deconstructive moment" in modern physics is signaled by the special mathematical formalization used to manage the infinities that would otherwise ensue as we calculate the results of these experiments. Both Heisenberg's famous uncertainty principle and Niels Bohr's equally famous complementary principle are just two further signs of the operation of this deconstructive moment. Ordinary logic no longer works.

My other example comes from the new realities of life on the border between Mexico and the United States. What has emerged, especially since NAFTA passed in 1993, is a zone existing on both sides of the border

that exhibits the permeability of structures, the intermixing of elements within and between structures, and the disjunctive temporality of the resulting cultural space between and within structures. What “time” is it there, on the border? What historical conjuncture, what mode of existence, is it of the past or the future? Who can tell? When asked whether they feel themselves to be Mexicans living in the United States or Americans working in Mexico, the respective populations of service and high-tech workers respond that they feel their first loyalty is to this border zone itself, whether identified with the place of work or of home or even of shopping! Often they speak of their hectic “commute” between home and work as the self-identifying sign of their time. Without specifically reading too much into this, we could fairly say, I think, that on the border, the specter of America’s global future is arriving virtually at every moment.

This spectral moment, which is also a spatial structure interrupting all centered structure, is anachronistic, anarchic, radically anterior and future alike, which is why Derrida figures it as the absolute *arrivant* (the absolutely “arriving” one, “the newcomer,” or “the arrival”). It is the messiah moment ever coming. Does this coming-messiah moment of apocalyptic differentiation and de-identification form the principal “apocalyptic” interest of global capital? Or given my empire burlesque frame, does it mean that the global scene of instruction for American critics should await the arrival of Nathan Lane from *The Bird Cage* dressed as Jesus in drag? The messiah moment is more discrete and secretive than that, even “here and now.”

We can also approach this moment via a more domestic scene, involving my admittedly precocious nineteen-month-old granddaughter, Maria. This scene, I confess, struck me as being so like the famous one of Freud’s grandson, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, playing with the spool of ribbon that it felt truly uncanny when I experienced it.

My daughter, Maria’s mother, Jessica, leaves for school each evening at five o’clock and returns after ten o’clock, long after Maria has gone to bed. As I was watching her, one day, soon after her mother left for school, Maria picked up one of her baby books, said to me, “Bye-bye” and “I miss you,” ran to a corner of the room next to the door, paused for a long moment, then turned around quickly, a sharp volte-face, rushed toward me, calling out, “I’m back, I’m back,” and fell into my opening arms. This



play was then performed repeatedly, ritualistically, for the next twenty or so minutes. The game of return, it appears, would be repeated again and yet again, at other times.

The open secret of Maria's performance of this unconscious fantasy, her acting it out, in which she spontaneously impersonated the mother she wished to see return—Maria going to the wall herself and then returning as other—lay not in the driven desire completing its imaginary circuit, or in her adoption of the active part in the symbolic scenario, both of which processes are, of course, significant in other contexts. No, what I found most fascinating here was the moment when Maria paused in the corner by the door, with her face to the place where the walls at the front of the house converged. In that "borderline" space of the real, she paused only for an apparently blank moment, a pregnant pause; it was always the same moment, the same virgin interval again, and took as long each time no matter how excited and raucous the game of return got. This "pure" moment between the going out and the coming back was not only where her unconscious wish received its formal "appearance" and yet remained in hiding, inapparent. It was also that wish openly, if spectrally, incarnated. William Blake called this imaginatively receptive moment welcoming the creative response of the future "the fugitive moment," which Satan's Watch-Fiends—all the dark emanations of Church, Nation, Mill, and School—could not capture or pervert to their rationalized, instrumental, profit-making ends. What I am calling Derrida's messiah moment embodies this uncanny structure of visionary fantasy in its most welcoming creative response to otherness, in oneself most of all, as an innovative repetition, just as Maria's game of return introduced for her the new role of student performance artist of desire. Derrida's messiah moment may thus be the mother of all moments. Besides, if there is an empire, can a messiah be far behind, whether burlesque in mode or not?

We might think of such a messiah moment not in terms of the mother's actual or remembered return but in light of the expectation, the hope, of a new coming increasingly disjoined from the habitual traces of the return. This openness of systems to the future, disconnected from any master narrative prefiguring the course of events, this radical contingency, is what I read from my granddaughter's drama. It is what can be read from the living-on-the-border I have alluded to; it is what experimental physicists read from their instruments every day. When enough of

these moments arise, who knows but that the new world order's apocalypse may be at hand? At the very least, a substantive transformation in U.S. institutions, especially those of education, could be forthcoming.

### Going Global!

As an editor of *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture*, I have been exposed in a variety of ways to the global point of view for some time now. My editorial colleagues and I have discussed it repeatedly, in person, over the phone, in conference calls, via e-mail, by means of the formal reports done on essays and reviews submitted, and so on. We have seen it both as the latest threat to critical thinking and as a unique opportunity for provoking its radical renewal. These discussions have occurred not only in the United States but around the world, in Tunisia, Bermuda, Berlin, and elsewhere; and privy to these discussions have been the local and specific intellectuals of the host locations.

In 1998 I coedited with Alan Singer, a Temple University colleague, a special issue of *boundary 2* entitled "Thinking through Art: Aesthetic Agency and Global Modernity."<sup>11</sup> Neither this professional exposure nor my intellectual participation in the global phenomenon overtaking literary and cultural studies has lessened my skepticism about it as a critical point of view, however much I may intend to make use of it. The reason for my continued skepticism and growing fascination for it was clarified recently for me by some research I conducted outside the field of literary and cultural criticism.<sup>12</sup>

But before discussing some of the results of that research, I need to say something about the subject within my field. The January 2001 issue of *PMLA* was devoted almost entirely to the special topic "Globalizing Literary Studies."<sup>13</sup> Coordinated by Giles Gunn, this issue contains nine articles by Paul Jay, Stephen Greenblatt, Arhiro Anas, Basem L. Ra'ad, David Chioni Moore, William Slaymaker, Robert Eric Livingston, Ian Baucom, and Wai Chee Dimoc. It also includes two talks on the topic given at the Modern Language Association Convention in 1999 by Edward W. Said, then president of the MLA, and by Rey Chow. Two things are noteworthy about the issue. The first is the absence of any "expert" governmental participants or consultants. Because there was considerable scholarship on display, this can only mean that such "expert" knowledge of the

foreign policy institutions was deliberately being excluded as ideologically questionable, even tainted by its entanglements with the American empire. The second thing of note, besides this ideological purity on the part of the American empire's literary and cultural critics, was their basic acceptance of the current and foreseeable status quo in their—and my—field, as signaled in one of Said's final comments: "The politics of identity and nationally grounded system of education remain at the core of what most of us do, despite changed boundaries and objects of research" in the profession of literary studies (68). I note these two features of this institutionally sanctioned special issue of *PMLA*—its ideological purity and its professional self-satisfaction—because they are the two this book most contests. Writing about globalization and not making use of all of what social sciences, government agencies, and the new media may have to offer on the topic is as silly as writing an essay on Shakespeare without checking out all of the relevant scholarship. More significantly, discussing globalization without recognizing its potentially revolutionary effects on any and all politics of identity, its possibly utopian subversion of the culture of representation itself, not to mention the structure of literary studies, is not a position that this book hopes to occupy.

Like my *boundary 2* colleagues, I have assumed that whether one was critical of it or not, with respect to the global point of view, its adoption meant that one presumed, in some sense, what Bruce Robbins, one of our associated editors and an editor of *Social Text*, refers to as the unprecedented global "hegemony" of the United States of America.<sup>14</sup> That is, the global point of view assumes the existence and power of the American empire, whether conceived in terms of military might, economic and political influence, or cultural domination; and whether condemned or used against itself in alliance with its critical others here and abroad, America, global America, in any or all of these dimensions, is the great imperial shadow haunting the global point of view.<sup>15</sup>

The global point of view looks at a rapidly modernizing, so-called developing rest of the world outside of Europe and North America and can read into this process of modernization a necessary Westernization, and into this Westernization, it can read in turn an inescapable Americanization. Modernization, Westernization, and Americanization are the trinity of global capitalism driving the forces of globalization. And these forces are leveling and homogenizing all the differences in the world,

disciplining them by destroying everywhere local customs, national cultures and traditions, and entire ways of life of ancient civilizations. At the same time, however, the global point of view also assumes that the globalization of technological change, especially in telecommunications, of political, financial, and social institutions, and of cultural representations has made possible new chances for, and new instruments of, substantial collaboration among America's critics, within and without. Of course, the network of spy satellites known as Echelon, which can easily trace all e-mail messages and tap any phone conversation in the world, may put a damper on these critics as they organize their various forms of resistance. . . . But that is another more problematic story.<sup>16</sup>

At the very least, critics of the presumed overwhelming American hegemony may do their work on the thousands or so "businessmen, bankers, government officials, intellectuals, and journalists from scores of countries" who meet each year at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, by lobbying these representatives of the "Davos cult," as it has been called, to use their influence and power in support of institutions and policies fostering international recognition and enforcement of human rights and other worthy causes of a new, socially democratic vision of the world.<sup>17</sup> Some of the critics of these critics, I must say, are even more skeptical than I am. Judith Butler, for one significant example, is cited by Bruce Robbins in his book *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress*, as claiming that the "Davos cult" and its critical proponents are following, wittingly or not, a barely disguised American agenda to make well-placed representatives of global cultural capital feel better about their elite roles in administering empire.<sup>18</sup> A therapeutic smart bomb, as it were.

However that may be, what's wrong with the global point of view, no matter who adopts it or for what purposes, is that it overestimates power. Despite all the hoopla and lamentation, American power after the Cold War has lessened, not grown. By all measures—military, economic, political, cultural—America has lost ground vis-à-vis the rest of the world. It is true that the spectacle of American power, especially in its military aspect, has become greater, but like a Hollywood action blockbuster, the special effects of American presence in the world may be sublime, even though our cinematic hero is just another robotic, muscle-bound goon who suffers from a bad heart from steroid abuse. In short, America may

not “be back,” after all. The events of September 11, 2001, tragically confirm this point.

Samuel P. Huntington, no apologist for America’s critics, to say the least, founder and coeditor of *Foreign Policy*, among other considerable distinctions, persuasively argues the pessimistic view of American and Western power in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.<sup>19</sup> With startling blurbs of praise from Francis Fukuyama, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* (“The book is dazzling in its scope and grasp of the intricacies of contemporary global politics”), and from Richard Bernstein, writing in the *New York Times* (“A benchmark for informed speculation . . . [and] a searching reflection on our global state”), and from Wang Gungwa, writing in *The National Interest* (“This is what is so stunning [about this book]: It is not just *about* the future but may actually help to shape it”), and from both Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski (but I’ll spare you their unsponsored, if even more extravagant, praise), Huntington’s book, often critical of these very figures, is an immediate disciplinary classic and an international best-seller. Here is its thesis:

Culture and cultural identities . . . civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post–Cold War world.

For the first time in history global politics is both multipolar and multicivilizational; modernization is distinct from Westernization and is producing neither a universal civilization in any meaningful sense nor the Westernization of non-Western societies.

The balance of power among civilizations is shifting: the West is declining in relative influence; Asian civilizations are expanding their economic, military, and political strength; Islam is exploding demographically with destabilizing consequences for Muslim countries and their neighbors; and non-Western civilizations generally are reaffirming the value of their own cultures.

The West’s universalist pretensions increasingly bring it into conflict with other civilization, most seriously with Islam and China; at the local level fault line wars largely between Muslims and non-Muslims, generate “kin-country rallying,” the threat of broader escalation, and hence efforts by core states to halt these wars.

The survival of the West depends on Americans reaffirming their Western identity and Westerners accepting their civilization as unique not universal and uniting to renew and preserve it against challenges from non-Western societies. Avoidance of a global war of civilization depends on . . . accepting . . . global politics. (20–21)

One can see in this last point Huntington's domestic political agenda, of course: a kind of realistic, hardheaded, pragmatic exposure to multiculturalism, so as to better reaffirm and defend Western civilization. Nonetheless the facts and figures, graphs and tables, and authoritative national and international archival materials, not to mention the praise of his critical opponents as well as his friends, make Huntington, the Albert J. Weatherhead III University Professor at Harvard, where he is also the director of the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies and the chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, an authority to be reckoned with, however lamentable or comforting that may be. And of course, in my field of literary and cultural studies, no one writing about or from the global point of view bothers even to mention Huntington's considerable achievement.<sup>20</sup> No one, that is, except Edward W. Said, in a previously unpublished essay collected in his *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Said attacks the original 1992 *Foreign Policy* essay by Huntington that became his 1996 book, but one of the things disabling Said's polemical critique is that in twenty-five pages, he quotes Huntington's essay only once, and that a single sentence. (For more on this, see chapter 1 in this volume.)

Let me make it clear that, first of all, Huntington does not argue for the lessening of American and Western power as a desirable goal. Nor, secondly, does he argue that the emerging world order of civilization—identity politics at large, as it were—including Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Western, Latin American, and African constituents and all of their panoply of core states, member states, lone countries, torn states, and cleft states, resembles some United States of the World, an *actual* global America, with liberal pluralistic values and institutions. In fact, for Huntington (and this is my third point), the driving force for this “new world order” is not so much globalization as such as the resurgence of indigenization, that is, the resurgence of so-called reactionary cultural identities based largely on the global religious revival, and not global

capital, a “fundamentalist” religious revival operative within the United States, too, all of which is a virtually universal response to the discontents, dislocations, and alienations that inevitably accompany modernization everywhere it occurs, whether in explicitly Western guise or not. Huntington, in other words, argues for a *realpolitik* position that recognizes the role of so-called unreason or feeling in compensating imaginatively for, and so ameliorating to some degree, the worst effects of the modern rationalization of the world. Once again, the tragedy of September 11, 2001, in New York City confirms this thesis strikingly.

I agree with this much of Huntington’s thesis, and I want to suggest that given such a revised global point of view, one can read the multicultural identity politics within the United States and Western countries generally as the new civic religion of social democracy pervading the new internationalism.

Another way of putting all this is to say that the two comparatively monolithic ideologies of the Cold War—Americanism and Communism—have been displaced by several competing civilizational visions of identity in difference based less purely on geopolitical strategies than on longstanding albeit very “messy” cultural affinities and identifications, mostly religious in nature. And this transference or displacement within “the new world order,” and to this vision of that order, often feels like the (admittedly necessary) abjection of the previous forms of life. Rather than two grand narratives structuring the horizon of the entire world there is now a postmodern plurality of possible story germs, most of them avowedly religious in nature, and all clearly mythopoeic in their lineaments.

If one wanted to play devil’s advocate at this point, one could suggest that Huntington’s “realistic” position in fact repeats, ironically enough, the metanarrative theory of romanticism as the emancipated resurgence of apparently outmoded cultural traditions in compensatory reaction to the Enlightenment’s instrumental reason. In Europe and America, according to this grand narrative, one position of the bourgeois avant-garde stands in opposition to another. Or one moment in the making of a broad middle-class society opposes another moment. Could it be that Huntington’s realistically displaced romantic vision is actually a mechanism through which global capital ensures itself a more (rather than less) heterogeneous and differential world?

One of the myths of critical theory, of course, perhaps derived from Marcuse or the Frankfurt school more generally, is the idea that capitalism requires a leveling and homogeneous “one-dimensional” playing field to operate in. In fact, as we see from the way the conditions of production and consumption in different locales are played off against each other, capitalism thrives best when cost and price margins between and among various regions, states, or hemispheres keep the cycle of investment, production, consumption, relocation, renewed investment, and so on, flowing freely. A multicivilizational world order, as opposed to a one-world or even a simplistically split or halved world order, makes for better opportunities to maximize the potential chances for greater differential profits.

It is important to see that this vision of a complex, heterogeneous, differentially interrelated world should not be identified with any one actual state or civilization or cultural institution (such as “literature”), not to mention any one political or financial institution such as the United Nations or the World Bank. Nonetheless, I believe that it is important to keep this vision as such in circulation as both the valued representation of alterity and *différance*, opposed to all utopian and dystopian single visions, and the preferred model of existence of capital in this epoch of its global manifestation. I will christen it, as a figure of the ultimate power in our moment of existence, after Emerson’s “new ideal America in the West” and call it “global America.” I will use this term here to designate the complex imaginative phenomenon of globalization. But I want to underscore the point that the name “global America” refers to no mode or style of existence of any other entity than itself. No person(s), no class, no people, no organization, no institution is singularly intended, nothing other than the otherwise anonymous, impersonal, and unnameable thing and agency, global capital.

What’s wrong with the global point of view? In my sense, nothing—so long as one recognizes in its critical or exculpatory versions that “global America” (or any of its avatars) is another uncanny phantom or specter, just like any other would-be unifying and totalizing representation of cultural (or other) identity, a fantasmatic fetish of identity. What really exists, of course, as we all know, is the realm of virtual life (or death), the undead dimension of capital, which is the sole kingdom at hand.<sup>21</sup>



In a special issue of *boundary 2* entitled “The University,” its editor, Paul A. Bové, in his opening note, sounds the theme of the issue (and indeed of much recent criticism) when he makes it clear that “the issues of education within globalization affect regions of the world unevenly but with repeated demands that the systemic effects and intents of globalization be analyzed everywhere they appear—and as such, that is, not merely as local instances of traditional problems or as instances of ‘imperialism’ on an old nationalist model.”<sup>22</sup> Bové has put his finger on what is at once the opportunity and the problem that the term “globalization” poses for understanding the changes transforming the university, disciplines and professions generally, the nation-state as a political institution, and “globally” the future of life on the planet. What does this “globalization, as such,” attitude imply? As “an object of analysis,” what is it that one is to analyze? Bové cites Henry Adams from his *Education* as his authority when he remarks that it was “Karl Marx, who alone, after 1848, foresaw radical change” in such global terms (1). What is it that we, following Marx (or Adams), can now see?

What these questions point to and underscore is the power of “globalization” as a new master term for criticism. Like “culture,” “power,” “gender,” “structure,” “presence,” or “form,” “globalization” implies specific realities that everyone at the moment already knows (or is presumed to know) and yet sounds suggestively vague enough to hold for a while a mysterious resonance. This is the opportunity and the problem of the term.

The specific realities everyone is presumed to already know when “globalization” is deployed are these: With the end of the Cold War, capitalism is no longer tied necessarily to the political and cultural forms of the nation-state, to the social institutions of any one civilization, or to the current or traditional lifestyles and customs of particular peoples. Large multi- and transnational corporations can now rationalize in their best interests without much restraint the production, distribution, advertising, and sale of the commodities they offer, wherever and whenever they can get the best deal. If it makes more sense to the bottom line to manufacture clothes in China, centralize distribution in Memphis, Tennessee, advertise out of New York City, and stimulate and feed the markets of the

Pacific Rim or of Russia, then so be it, no matter what consequences for others—economic, political and social, ethical and so on—may follow. Consequently we can see how “globalization” refers specifically to this free-floating quality, this differential sense of the freedom to move anywhere, at any time, from one locale to another around the world, to take advantage of the latest and immediately foreseeable opportunities while leaving the problems behind. Capitalism thrives best, it is presumed, when all of its options remain open, even if this results in the destruction of the environment, the dislocation and migration of millions of people, the transformation of traditional ways of life beyond recognition, the alienation and abjection, not to mention the violent resistances, of the dispossessed and the displaced, the resurgence of ethnic and religious identities and conflicts across borders and within regions—and the list goes on. Capitalism’s power to penetrate at will into, and to withdraw from, any place (or time) in the world is what “globalization” (like “empire,” or any other “god term”) can ultimately mean.

Of course, put like this, “globalization” takes on mythical proportions. A Zeus or a Satan comes to mind. But what lies behind such unavoidable mythopoeia is indeed real enough, all too real, in fact: the ubiquitous substitution of provisional associations for permanent communities, associations based on comparatively immediate material interests or gains, the “cash-nexus,” as Marx would have said, versus the connections based on immemorial ways of life.

With fewer and fewer internal or external checks on capitalism and with its obvious appeal to immediate material self-interest, nothing appears able to withstand its corrosive power to dissolve all bonds, personal, professional, whatever. Within the modern American university system to which Bové alludes, this has meant (1) the division of the faculty into a small and ever shrinking class of professionals with tenure (or at least with its possibility) and a growing class of part-timers, gypsy scholars, higher education’s migrant workers, without any possibility of tenure, who are willing and able to teach anywhere, at a moment’s notice, as administrators decree; (2) the dismantling of the tenure system, sometimes as outright abolition by a certain date, other times via the gradual proletarianization, the deprofessionalization, of working conditions—via modern corporate efficiency measures, including the perfunctory and lame displays of administrators inviting faculty “input” or “feedback”;

(3) the shift from public support for research and publication to private foundational support or market-based, for-profit-only sources; (4) the adoption of a multicultural ethical imperative and its “politically correct” manifestations, which facilitates the assimilation of university personnel—administrators, faculty, staff, and students—to the diverse demands of global capital’s various markets. And on and on it could go.

To put in a nutshell what globalization as such can mean for the university or any other institution, here or abroad, I will use a hypothetical scene and its bluntly allegorical interpretation that has become a popular touchstone in the circles of international journalists, policy makers, and global critics, who have given “globalization” its original cachet:

Think of a stretch limo in the pot-holed streets of New York City, where homeless beggars live. Inside the limo are the air-conditioned post-industrial regions of North America, Europe, the emerging Pacific Rim, and a few other isolated places with their trade summitry and computer-information highways. Outside is the rest of mankind, going in a completely different direction.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, any institution, people, or individual who reads this scene, an admittedly fabulous and obviously impossible fantasy scene of instruction, would want to be, it is also presumed, within global capital’s stretch limo (if only to escape various sorts of “heat”) no matter what one’s critical, even revolutionary, motives and radical contentions might be. Marx, after all, did some of his best work of analysis and theory in the British Museum, in London’s Bloomsbury neighborhood.

Some people, I am sure, when reading this global scene of instruction or when thinking about the different aspects of globalization, will want to offer alternative takes on the term or its aspects. Especially troublesome may be the diminishment of individual and collective agency my story of “globalization, as such” appears to imply. As Marx himself remarks, however, men—and women, too, of course—make their histories, but not as they think. Let me lay my cards all out on the table, then. Whatever the reality may be with respect to this question of agency, the rhetoric of “globalization, as such,” in the texts of policy makers or their critics, regardless of anyone’s intentions in the matter, assumes a tactical or at most a strategic choice among options predefined as possible by present

circumstances. No person or group, however ingenious in resistance or passionate (or “anarchic” or “multitudinous”) in revolutionary aspiration, can abolish these present circumstances and choose the impossible fantasy, whatever it could be, that is, choose as certain the messianic future that is always coming, the utopian future of the work of universal liberation. I don’t think it is a capitulation to a pandemic cynicism or “weak” neopragmatism to share such an assumption, at least for now.

One consequence of this global perspective is that all calls for resistance and revolution—especially the calls coming from other riders in the air-conditioned stretch limo, even from the newest riders, those best and brightest from “outside,” from “the rest of mankind,” here and abroad, who have hitched a ride, as it were—ring not so much false or hollow as something more troubling because something less classifiable and more ambiguous, unstable, mixed in its motive, something decidedly undecidable, what I will call “the authentic gimmick.”

Now, by “the authentic gimmick,” I mean not just to invoke the specious simulacrum, the postmodern decoy of the supposed “real thing,” the copy of a copy of a copy of some explicitly fabricated norm, some designed makeshift model or improvised property. I also, and even more so, mean to suggest the specific move or technique, constitutive of a rhetorical practice, of a professional or political agenda or program, and of a subject position, identity, persona, or “personality” that permits the cultural work in question—whatever it may be—to be envisioned at all, in however abject a form or mode. As a practice, program, and subject position, “the authentic gimmick” can best be demonstrated by (and in) the “field” or the “arena,” “the discipline” or the “culture,” the “lifestyle,” associated with the sort of labor performed in the American “catch-as-catch-can” profession of pro wrestling, especially in its latest “hard-core” style.

In pro wrestling, “the gimmick” is the term used openly by everyone concerned—promoters, wrestlers, commentators, fans—to refer to what the wrestler says, does, and represents at the moment in his or her career. It is the “commodity-theme.” Pro wrestling today is a knowing parody, a witting travesty, of global capital—the best, most developed example of empire burlesque. Wrestlers come from every part of the world and assume identities that span various time periods (past, present, and future)—“the Road Warriors” have been a famous tag team for over

fifteen years now—and various cultures, nations, peoples, all the living and even the undead! (“The Undertaker” from “Death Valley” is a case in point of the latter.) The only thing that matters is the survival and enhancement of the now multinational “federation” or transnational communications and entertainment conglomerate that sells the matches and wrestlers, the T-shirts, the videos, the computer games, the children’s toys (“Bone-Crunchin’ Buddies”), the collectable cards, and so on to international audiences of proles *and* elites around the world. In disclosing and, most recently, reflecting rather analytically on its representative status as a self-conscious parody of global capital, as in the text of the pro wrestler Mick Foley’s best-selling memoir *Mankind: Have a Nice Day! A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, American pro wrestling is becoming a radical parody of “globalization, as such.”<sup>24</sup> To put it in terms of our stretch limo global scene of instruction, in pro wrestling, the “inside” and the “outside” of the business are coming out and slipping in virtually all the time.

Consider Foley’s original “authentic gimmick.” As “Cactus Jack Manson,” from “Truth or Consequences, New Mexico,” Foley was a sado-masochistic outlaw messiah type, a kind of Clint Eastwood pale rider on angel dust. He talked crazy, fought in barbed-wire matches, and Japanese death matches, with C-4 explosives, the object of which was to survive slamming your opponent onto a board, the back of which was rigged with the plastique, and getting the pin fall. Foley as Cactus Jack did amazing stunts, took extraordinary risks, and endured a great amount of punishment. Unexpectedly, as this bizarro “heel,” he won fan approval vis-à-vis the “pretty-faced heroes.” Cast as the pure embodiment of diabolical madness, Cactus Jack, to the fan, felt more “authentic” in his gimmick. Could this neopragmatist genuine fictionality be what Harold Bloom meant by entitling his book about “the American difference” *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*? However that may be, Foley’s authentic gimmick was solid and stable enough that he had a recognizable commodity-identity and a habitus flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances. As a practice, as a performance, and as (self-) promotion, it worked. Such is professional wrestling’s not so strange identity politics, with a vengeance. Under late capitalism, within the American university, method, position, polemic, and critical personality make up criticism’s authentic gimmickry.

Let’s look a bit more closely at this notion of the authentic gimmick.

Mick Foley, reflecting on “the best gimmicks in wrestling,” claims that they are “actually extensions of a real-life personality.” By this, Foley means a professional dramatization of one’s familiar “habits of mind” (488). Foley notes that the proof or test of such a gimmick is whether it catches on with the audience, and if it does so, it is because the gimmick has been authenticated in and by “blood.” As everyone knows, and as even the wrestlers now readily admit, the outcomes of the matches are predetermined. But how these preset conclusions are reached, that is, how the scripts are improvised on, with little or no special rehearsal for specific matches—all of that is left to the wrestlers themselves to work out, in “the act,” as it were.

This is one reason that Foley, in his personae of Cactus Jack, Mankind, and Dude Love (the latter two being, respectively, the heavy metal dog-muzzled menace and the sixties nerdy would-be Dead Head), has suffered eight concussions, broken his nose twice and his jaw once, had four front teeth knocked out, and his right ear ripped off, received over 325 stitches, and at the age of thirty-four, after fifteen years in the business, been forced by his condition to retire for his own good. I could have listed more of his injuries, and have not bothered to mention all the indignities and (self-) humiliations he endured, but I think I have made my point, which is that it is the amount of pain incurred and sacrifice made, in deploying and executing the authentic gimmick, that marks it as such. The spectral riders in that global stretch limo should bleed a little, bear (and bare) scars, wring a bit of pathos out of their professional situations, sing somewhat of their sufferings—hence the glut of memoirs coming from American professionals nowadays, perhaps.

In any event, it is clearly the case that pro wrestling and pro lit crit, American style, are not the same thing in every particular, to say the least, even in a global perspective. At least, not yet. The former is more honest about its authentic gimmickry, for one thing.

But I can easily imagine a tag team death match between . . . Oh, well, perhaps, I’d better not say, after all.

Of course, we teachers and scholars of the English language and its literatures and cultures really have no direct way of authenticating our gimmicks. We have our “agons” and festive contests and preset rituals, but no blood gets spilled, no bones are broken, no lives are cut short. Thank God, I guess. But I think it is for this reason that our profession

hates itself, even as its state of abjection is generally more disdained than even pro wrestling by other American professionals, and our profession's leading members seek gratuitous connections with groups and causes, here and globally, in which the threat or promise of violence and bloodshed, of real revolution—for the highest moral purposes, naturally—looms over the horizon.

### Empire and Identity

The chapters of this book thus trace the emergence over the last decade or so of a new global scene of instruction for the formation of critical identity in America. Each generation of critics, no matter how technically or professionally focused, bears the date mark of its moment of formation. It rehearses the traumatic experience of its ritual inscription by that moment in the cultural history of the institution via the performance and conceptualization of an identity theme. And it expresses this theme repeatedly in its most representative allegorical interpretations of texts, figures, careers, theories, and contexts. The god that failed of Marxism, the Cold War, the counterculture, the rise of professionalization—these moments have been subsumed by globalization. It represents the horizon of possibility within which critical work now is practiced.

Central to this development of a new global scene of instruction for American critical identity is a different experience of work and time, of borders and subjectivity. The new technologies of communications make every corner of the globe available for presentation at any moment of the day or night. They also open up every moment to the demands and imperatives of work, so much so that it appears increasingly to be the case that people are virtually dreaming, submerged in a semiautomatic pre-conscious state, almost all the time, under the threat of producing more and more production, of whatever sort it may be. The lives we are living now are progressively less and less our own. And this phenomenon of possessed dispossession is systematically becoming the common global experience: for individuals and entire peoples alike. Another way of “plotting” it, following all the signs, such as robotics, genetic engineering, the Internet revolution, virtuality unbound, the pervasiveness of sci-fi culture, is that a new form of life is emerging, simultaneously, all over the