

Weisberg that my essay encourages “less the recasting than the continuation of what has been most provocative in the work already out there” (though we may disagree about what has been most provocative). But I certainly don’t want (as Weisberg asserts I do) to “liberate narrators of all stripes to participate fully and positively in the political world,” unless “positively” is seen as a modifier sufficiently powerful to convert “narrators of all stripes” into those whose specific participation I would welcome.

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The Fate of Critical Terms

TO THE EDITOR:

Regarding the Editor’s Column in the October issue (“What’s Wrong with These Terms? A Conversation with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Diana Taylor” [120 (2005): 1497–1508]): in a literary universe, it’s not surprising that *representation* has become so broadly applied that it refers to almost everything. This seems to be the fate of many successful critical terms, which come to embody far more than a trope, all the way to a mode of thinking or even a whole outlook. For instance, it’s been remarked (a few too many times) that we live in an *ironic* age. And when the average English graduate student says, “Let’s deconstruct that,” but simply means to analyze it, something similar has occurred with Derrida.

But the trend isn’t so much an occasion for hand-wringing as it is a reflection on the evolution of language. An individual pioneers a term, a group appropriates it, the masses popularize it, and it’s time for the thinkers to come up with something new.

Paradoxically, the moment of a term’s greatest currency is when it’s almost denuded of meaning. Over a decade ago, when the word *post-modern* seemed to be part of every fifth book title exhibited at the MLA convention, any discerning critic should have realized that it was time to move on.

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The State of United States Southern Literary Studies

TO THE EDITOR:

The review essays in the Changing Profession section of *PMLA* provide a welcome addition to the journal. In “Writing the New Middle Ages” (120 [2005]: 422–41), for example, Stephen G. Nichols offers a model essay celebrating the changes in a field that remained traditional for longer, perhaps, than some others. Unfortunately, while United States southern literary studies is also emerging from a similarly perceived backwardness problem, I fear that Barbara Ladd’s essay (“Literary Studies: The Southern United States, 2005” [1628–39]), perhaps inadvertently, appears less interested in celebrating our field’s new energies than in trying to contain them.

The problems with the essay are often but not always temporal. Particularly in a section labeled The Changing Profession, it does not do the field any favors in 2005 to say its “most salient problematics” are race and gender (1630). Furthermore, Ladd’s take on gender is strangely heteronormative, as though major books by Minrose Gwin, John Howard, Tara McPherson, and Gary Richards, not to mention Howard’s 1997 anthology *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, had not put queer issues on the field’s front burner.

While Ladd seems to commence carefully and with appropriate critical distance from the old field-structuring categories of place, community, and so forth, she ends up classifying all these as “varieties of memory” and then contrasting southern literature with the “national project of forgetting” (1629, 1637). But if American exceptionalism is bad, surely southern exceptionalism, redolent of what Freud called the narcissism of small differences, is bad too. (If it is not, Ladd probably owes the broad *PMLA* audience a theoretical account of why not, given the widespread Americanist consensus about exceptionalisms.) And in any event, as the historians David Blight, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, and David Goldfield, among many others, have forcefully reminded us, by denying that the Civil War was about slavery (to cite but the most glaring counterexample), the white South has repeatedly presented not an alternative to but a frightening dependence on “the evasions offered by willed amnesias” (1637).