Toward an Institutional Critique: An Interview with David B. Downing

Jeffrey J. Williams

David Downing has edited *Works and Days* for more than thirty years. As its initial subtitle announced, the journal encouraged "Essays in the Socio-Historical Dimensions of Literature and the Arts" rather than conventional literary criticism, and it has been, under Downing's watch, one of the few forums featuring institutional criticism, particularly of academic labor and contemporary higher education, sponsoring special issues on Richard Ohmann, the Information University, academic freedom, and scholarly activism, among others.

After beginning as an Americanist (with a dissertation on Hawthorne), in his own writing Downing has investigated the rise of theory, the profession of literature, and the politics of the university. This culminated in his book *The Knowledge Contract: Politics and Paradigms in the Academic Workplace* (U of Nebraska P, 2005), as well as his co-edited volume *Academic Freedom in the Post-9/11 Era* (with Edward J. Carvalho; Palgrave, 2010), stemming from a special issue of *Works and Days* with essays by Ward Churchill, Cary Nelson, Marc Bousquet, and many others.

Unlike most theorists (but like Ohmann and Gerald Graff), Downing has also focused on teaching, from writing instruction to ways of integrating theory in the curriculum, in several edited or co-edited volumes, including *Practicing Theory in Introductory College Literary Courses* (with James M. Cahalan; NCTE, 1992), *Changing Classroom Practices: Resources for Literary and Cultural Studies* (NCTE, 1994), and *Beyond English, Inc.: Curricular Reform in a Global Economy* (with Claude Mark Hurlbert and Paula Mathieu; Heinemann, 2002). He also co-edited *Image and Ideology in Modern/Postmodern Discourse* (with Susan Bazargan; SUNY P, 1991), drawing on early issues of *Works and Days*.

WORKS AND DAYS 70/71, Vol. 36, 2018-19

Born outside Boston, Downing attended Beloit College (BA in philosophy, 1970), San Francisco State University (MA in creative writing, 1974), and SUNY-Buffalo (PhD in English, 1980), where he worked with Leslie Fiedler, among others. He taught at Eastern Illinois University from 1979 to 1988, when he moved to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he directed the graduate program in literary studies for many years and is currently Distinguished University Professor of English.

This interview took place on 17 November 2017, in Pittsburgh, and was conducted and edited by Jeffrey J. Williams. It was transcribed by Katie Eckenwiler, an MA student in professional writing at Carnegie Mellon University.

Williams: You've edited *Works and Days* for 35 years now, which is quite an accomplishment. How would you characterize what kind of journal it is?

Downing: It had a mission that grew out of its time, shifting from literary criticism to the historical, social, and political dimensions of literary studies, and branched into various sorts of cultural domains, particularly institutional critique. That included the sociology of our profession, and changes in socio-economics, and what you've come to call critical university studies. We were concerned with gaining some sort of self-reflective account of what affected our lives as professors of English. The field basically collapsed from the time I went through graduate school to now, in terms of jobs. How did this happen? What changes in the global political economy and the disciplinary and professional world occurred?

The history of the journal matches my own history in the field: when I started I was thinking I might be a literary critic, but I moved toward broader cultural studies. I was historically so naïve when I started. In graduate school in the 1970s, most of the professors I had had lives which seemed enviable: they went to graduate school and when they were getting their doctorate, their advisors usually said, "Well, do you want to go to the West Coast or the East Coast? Would you rather go to Stanford or Johns Hopkins?" Or something like that. It was expected that some of us were going to major graduate schools and would follow in the steps of our professors. But the job market collapsed during the late 70s, when I was in graduate school, and I didn't have a clue then why exactly it happened.

Williams: The subtitle of the journal during the first ten years emphasizes the socio-historical study of literature. How do you think the journal fit among other journals? In midcentury, there were plenty of literary magazines, but in the 1970s a spate of theory journals were founded. It doesn't strike me that *Works and Days* is a theory journal precisely.

Downing: It wasn't. SUNY-Buffalo, where it started, was in the heyday of high theory, but it was clear that the theory we wanted would have something to do with the sociology, history, and politics that would lead to real change. It had a practical application. *Works and Days* started when I was a graduate student in 1979, but I wasn't involved with it at first, although I knew the people, especially Brian Caraher, who was one of my best friends at SUNY-Buffalo. A lot of us felt the age of high theory was heady, but the most important thing for us was understanding the circumstances of our own lives and the sociology and the politics we were involved in. Also, there was a deliberately left-wing orientation to the journal from its beginnings.

Williams: I might characterize it as from the non-Marxist left. There were broadly Marxist journals, like *New German Critique* or even *Minnesota Review*. Maybe how I would characterize it is that it was on the independent left.

Downing: It certainly aimed to be independent. Right from the beginning, one of the things I did was keep the copyright in my name rather than put it in an institutional name. That gave me a lot of autonomy.

Williams: Almost all theory journals were institutionally based, but yours was never high academic or published by an academic press.

Downing: High theory suggested to me coming from positions of power by well-known people, but *Works and Days* came from graduate students and beginning assistant professors. So we had a mission to bring the force of the most useful kinds of theory to issues pertinent to the lives of graduate students, beginning assistant professors, and those who were not in positions of high power. High theory was a game that seemed to be conservative in politics. You can think of any number of people who fit that model.

The journal definitely had an agenda related to social justice. Social justice was behind Hesiod's original *Works and Days,* and it was behind the graduate students I knew and the motivation for adapting Hesiod's title to the journal.

Williams: It first came out in 1979 and saw two issues, but then went on hiatus for a few years until you took it up. The first issues show a kind of sixties impulse—one includes a dialogue between John Cage and Robert Creeley, for instance. But when you started in 1984, it became a different journal. It's a journal of criticism—there's no creative writing—and the authors are academics, although it's not academic in the usual way.

Downing: We were interested in shifting from being literary critics talking about language and form and poststructural theory, which were in their heyday at that time, but we felt we didn't have good models to do it. How could we use what was most important about these ideas and bring it to our social, political and everyday lives? I thought most other journals were still replicating the model of high theory, even if they were Marxist journals, and often in an esoteric jargon that could be impenetrable for many people. We were committed to bringing it down to earth, bringing literary criticism to cultural criticism in a practical and everyday way.

A lot of us had been deeply influenced in graduate school by Foucault's study of institutions and power, but if you read *The Archeology of Knowledge,* it was hard to tell what it meant unless you translated it to accessible prose. So part of it was an act of translation. Hesiod's *Works and Days* was a model because it had a brother talking to a younger brother about things that matter, like how to run the farm and how to resist the lords, or basilees, who were sometimes unjust and unfair. So Hesiod gave a theoretical reflection on social injustice, but in ordinary language accessible to farmers.

When I say bring it to the everyday, we were all teachers. And we all became aware that we were more likely to get jobs in institutions that required higher teaching loads than our teachers had, so we had a deep sense that there had to be changes in what we were doing in our teaching. We had been influenced by the beginnings of the critical pedagogy movement. Our graduate seminars seemed to be run in quite traditional ways, with the same authority structures, and that was something that bothered us and we thought should be changed.

Williams: You mentioned people you knew at Buffalo founded it, but you weren't in the first group. How did it come about?

Downing: The editorial collective—of which I was not a member, partly because I was living in Rochester and leaving by 1979—included Glen Bowman, Karen Peterson, and Brian Caraher, and a few other people. I was talking with Brian while it was happening and we were tossing around titles, and Brian came up with Hesiod's title because it depicted a world where there was no separation of the literary from the social and the political. We were trying to connect poetry, aesthetics, the literary, and theory to the practical world of work, labor, and everyday life.

Then what happened was that I got my first job at Eastern Illinois University, and in 1980 Brian joined me at Eastern Illinois. The editorial board at Buffalo had dispersed, and Brian and I thought, "Well, we'll do it." It took us almost three years to get it going and do all the preliminary work, talk to the deans and provosts and get everybody to support it, set up an advisory board, and get a managing editor. Our first issue came out in 1984. Brian and I thought we would be co-editors, but he got a job at Indiana University and left. So I ended up editing it, with him and our colleague at Eastern Illinois, Susan Bazargan, as associate editors.

We also worked closely with our colleague Victor Vitanza, who had started *PreText*. He gave us a model of how to do it—what printers to use, how exactly all that works. Victor left around 1981, but that actually turned out to be to the journal's advantage since the administration was perhaps more open to giving us funding after they lost a journal.

Then we applied for an ISSN number from the Library of Congress, and we added the subtitle, *Essays in the Socio-Historical Dimensions of Literature and Arts*, to avoid plagiarizing Hesiod's title.

Williams: Starting out, how did you get material?

Downing: The first thing we did was tap the network we had. We didn't reach out to superstars in the field; we reached out to people we worked with or knew. We reached out to mostly peers. When you're an editor, as you know, you get a sense of connectivity and community with people through the journal. I think that was a huge benefit for me doing this, reaching out and working with the people with whom I wanted to work.

Williams: If I were to periodize the journal, I would mark off three broad phases, although the first and the third divide into two shorter phases. The first phase is roughly from 84 to 93, when it has white covers. At first you're doing cultural criticism and, and as the subtitle goes, underscoring the socio-historical dimension of literature. Then, still in that general phase, you move to look more self-consciously at institutions. You can see the change in the mission statement—it first notes a focus on arts and society, but then in 1988 the statement adds an emphasis on institutional concerns.

That's the first phase, announcing a cultural criticism, though it moves from literature to more attention to the institution itself. In the next broad phase, there's a decided shift to focus almost entirely on cyberspace. That's from 1994 to 2002, and the issues get thicker and you shift to black covers. It's clear you were excited about the possibilities of cyberspace, and it was an experiment, with issues featuring email correspondence, for instance, although it seems like that experiment didn't really turn out the way you'd hoped.

Then the third phase occurs from 2003 to now, where you return to institutional criticism, but you do almost all guest issues, and they're quite sizeable, almost like book collections rather than journal issues. From 2003-11, you cover institutional histories and politics of criticism, and after 2012 you focus more on critical university studies.

Downing: I think that's shrewd. You got the shift in the first phase that might be hard to tell for people looking back. The way I see it is that we started off with a kind of new historicist view that we were going to turn literary criticism into a kind of cultural criticism, making it socio-historically, politically, and economically savvy at the same time. It was an interpretative task, and it was still a reaction against New Criticism or formalism.

The next shift was deliberate, and in the mid-80s we were moving toward institutional critique. We had a broad sense of the institution, so it included the institution of teaching as well as institutional structures. We wanted to look at the actual practices we were doing, both in our teaching and in our scholarly work, in terms of how they function within the discipline, the institution, and so forth. The big special issue on "Image and Ideology" in 1988 (which later became a book with SUNY) capped the first phase off, and after that I felt that I had finished what I could do with the journal in terms of literary criticism.

That issue came about partly because I had met Tom Mitchell at the School of Criticism and Theory.

Williams: What year was that?

Downing: 1983. He was one of the editors of *Critical Inquiry* and one of the leading figures in iconology, the study of images. I had done a brief survey of iconology, and it hadn't connected to the socio-historical or political domain, so the volume explored that.

From there, it was clear that I wasn't going be a literary critic anymore. I had published articles on literary works—my dissertation was on Hawthorne—but I thought institutional critique was more important.

Williams: You published some unusual things in the first decade. You have a special issue on cultural criticism that was unusual in its moment, and you have writing on radical fiction, pragmatism, and pedagogy—certainly more than most critical journals at the time. It's also striking that you publish work from people who were involved in GRIP, the Group for Research on the Institutionalization and Professionalization of Literary Studies Project that was forming at the time, and SCE, the Society for Critical Exchange.

Downing: During the 1980s, a lot of what we published came out of my involvement with SCE and the GRIP project. My big question was asking about the politics of the institution and its socio-economics. The Society for Critical Exchange started earlier, and I met people like Jerry Graff and David Bleich through it. The GRIP project was formed later, as I recall in the late 80s, which is when I became involved in it. Those of us involved in the GRIP project did panels at MLA or MMLA, and I remember people telling us, "Well, you guys are just griping." I think Jonathan Culler said that. And I thought, yes, we're griping; isn't that what you do when you see a problem? We're not sweeping it under the table and we should bring the theory and the history and the politics to figure out what's going on and why we're griping. Those of us who were younger in the profession found it was difficult to gain a foothold in what became a precarious career investment.

SCE brought many people into my life that became close friends, colleagues, and people that I've worked with in my career. It was through SCE and GRIP that we came in contact with people who were actually doing what I would call institutional critique and turning, say, Foucault to a study of how power, politics, and economics

work through our institutional structures, people like Dick Ohmann, Jonathan Arac, Paul Bove, Paul Smith, Stanley Fish, Jim Berlin, James Sosnoski, Patty Harkin, David Shumway, and so forth. I think we all felt this was important work and that there wasn't enough support for doing the kind of institutional critique we felt needed to be done, and therefore we needed some alternatives. What's interesting, looking back, is that this institutional critique grew into what you call critical university studies. It has its roots in this institutional critique.

Williams: It's certainly one source, and your journal probably focused on institutional criticism more than any other. In that period, can you pull out any highlights that stand out?

Downing: There are a lot of things, but one thing that stood out was the pair of issues that came out in 1990 and 91 on pedagogy. They were generated from a very large conference that I organized on the role of theory in the undergraduate literature classroom that took place in 1990, and I edited a collection from NCTE, *Changing Classroom Practices*, that grew out of this work. We had this huge conference with 350 people at IUP [Indiana University of Pennsylvania]. It was too big for Indiana—we didn't have enough hotel rooms!

Williams: In contrast to the highlights, are there any glitches that you remember, or things that you would do differently?

Downing: One of the things that I learned as an editor is how easy it is to embarrass yourself. As hard as we've tried, we are still low in production and we're not at a major research university, and we're mostly doing it ourselves, so we've never had a perfect volume; there are always mistakes that you don't see until it's in print. When you're independent, you're trying to do the best you can and you do not have an enormous staff. This sounds like a minor thing but I am keenly aware of where mistakes are in some volumes.

Then there are issues in the cyberspace series that were experimental, but in some ways they didn't work. But I thought it was valuable to try them. The interesting thing was the events around which the issues were structured, I felt, were better than the products we published. Events like the Tick-Tock project and the Unlock project were dynamic, free-flowing, and everybody enjoyed them, and we met new people and got a lot of work done, but they don't work as well as issues.

Williams: The second phase of the journal, from 1994 to 2002, does seem a significant change. In the first phase it was a more standard journal—it came out twice a year, each issue is about a hundred pages with, say, five essays and maybe a review. After that, you change to doorstop issues, usually one a year, and you're dealing with the intersection of electronic and print media. You have several issues on cyberspace, as well as a long honorary volume for James Berlin after he died.

Downing: Beginning in 1994, we started what I call the Black Series (when we changed the covers to a black background), which was a structurally different mode of operating for us. Every volume was now going to be a special topic volume that I edited, and we were not accepting submissions from the field. Instead, we encouraged and would seek out groups or collaborative projects with various people who needed a forum, and we would work with them in producing a volume.

Part of the reason was that I found we could get much more depth focusing a whole volume on a single topic and making it a volume per year. That's a double issue, so it was like editing a book every year. That was more interesting to me because of the focus and development of a project, rather than following the typical format of having people submit essays on a wide range of topics. So, in a certain sense, instead of a journal it became similar to a book series where we were doing these projects, and I would work with the guest editors in collaboration.

Williams: I respect the experiment, but it seems to me that those issues are uneven because they print emails and other kinds of casual writing. They're dialogic, but it's like reading people's everyday messages.

Downing: I agree, but we were experimenting: Could we have a dialogical issue where we had exchanges in the development of a project? Could we make it part of an archive? We were trying to do something that was innovative—dialogical, collaborative, and making an archive of the process. But I don't think it worked all that successfully, so we didn't do it after a while.

Williams: It is true that *Postmodern Culture* started around that time, I think in 1991, as the first online journal in the humanities. Although

it seems like all journals have them now, most journals did not have a web component. So your experiment was unusual in its time, and it's clear that you were excited about the political possibilities for online.

Downing: I want to emphasize the double-sidedness of the vision. I worked a lot with Jim Sosnoski, and we saw that there were major changes in information technology, in electronic and digital media, and that they were changing social relations, for good and bad. We saw the potentiality for the good things and got excited about that. Some of the new software made communication more instantaneous and more open and available, so there were real advantages.

But even then, we were not cyber-utopians because we knew that the geography of cyberspace would be rapidly colonized by the dominant political economy of late capitalism. Sure enough, it has been more than ever. Jim Sosnoski's point was a good one: unless we as humanist scholars get involved, what we're doing is handing over the controls of the software to the programmers and people outside our field. Jim even helped me learn to do some coding and HTML in rudimentary ways. Most of the teaching software reproduced the most traditional kinds of pedagogies because it was done by engineers who had simple information transfer models.

There are some successes in those issues, too. I personally like the honorary issue for Jim Berlin, since he was so important in the institutional study of composition and he died prematurely. Even the experimental issues, like the Tick-Tock project and Unlock project, have regular essays along with their archives. When you experiment, you take risks and some things don't work as well as others, but I felt like I had done as much as I could.

Williams: After that phase, in 2003 you turn to large-scale institutional histories. You do honorary issues, like the one on Ohmann (2005), which I think was great, or the history of SCE (2007), or the history of the New American Movement that Victor Cohen guest edited in (2010). Or you had the issue on Bousquet (2003), which was a unique production, geared around his work that was just coming out and gathering several of his pieces alongside 15 or 20 essays by people responding to it. The others are more in a retrospective mode, but that one supports the new impetus on academic labor that was just starting to coalesce.

This phase might break down to two parts, the first being more retrospective, on institutional histories, and the second on critical university studies, with issues on Bosuquet as well as academic freedom and "scholactivism."

Downing: I think you've said it well. After we had done the information technology phase and those collaborative projects, I was wanting to turn to institutional critique, and I thought there were important strands that we might need to recover. Dick Ohmann's work was really important and formative for us, and the Ohmann issue was also one of my favorites. From that, I developed the idea for the SCE issue, which I thought was also important to recover.

Since Bill Readings published *University in Ruins* in 1996, there was an explosion of things about the university and how it was essential to contemporary life but something terrible was happening to it—not that it was ever pure, but we had to study this, so that led to volumes on critical university studies. That began with the issue on the Information University, with four essays by Marc Bousquet, which I knew were pushing further ahead of the intuitional critique I had seen in the past, so I wanted to identify that strand, and we got people to respond to those because I wanted that kind of exchange going on in it. He had made some people in composition really upset, and we got them to write a piece in exchange, and then had Marc respond to their piece. I liked that issue very much.

From then on I committed myself to the single volume, double-issue format, which enabled me to go into these areas in a kind of depth that I couldn't in the old twice-a-year, two-issue, biannual format. I liked it much better; it improved my life. When I was doing these special projects, I felt deeply invested in what we were doing on each project. And they involved an awful lot of people. The academic freedom issue (2008-9) was a part of that phase and addressed something that was extremely topical after 9/11. We went to a wide range of people, some whose cases were in the national media like Ward Churchill.

Williams: I want to ask about pragmatic issues in editing. Do you have any advice you would give?

Downing: The first piece of advice has to do with the move to online journals. As you have also said, the cost and the labor of pro-

ducing a journal is mostly outside of the print publication cost. So I think you have to be very wary of the push to go online and think you're saving a huge amount of money. It is just an absolute myth. We archive our issues online after a year, but I still like the print volumes and the print medium. Whenever you think that you'll go online and save all this money, that means people are just going to do all the editing for free. "Oh, we're just going to have our graduate students do it on their breaks from their job as a barista at Starbucks." The resources needed to edit a journal like this are mostly labor: it takes a great deal of time and a great deal of labor, whether you do print or online.

Williams: Do you have cautionary advice, or one thing you wouldn't do if you did it again?

Downing: Again, it's the resources. There are many rewarding things about being an editor. But the cautionary tale is to make sure you have sufficient resources. My own situation with *Works and Days* at IUP illuminates this: when I came to IUP in '88, everybody was very friendly to me, the Provost, the Dean, even the President of the University. And I said, "I'll need this and this for *Works and Days*," and they gave it to me, including some of the funds for assistants and release time.

Williams: It was a different era.

Downing: Yes, a totally different era. But the thing I did that was most important was asking for the details to be in my contract of hire. They said, "you don't need it; we're good for it." So I joked, "I'm just paranoid," and they put it in writing. That was the most propitious thing I did. When I came to IUP, I think there were 10 or 12 journals in various other fields, and they were all supported to various degrees. But starting in the late 1990s, they ended up defunding the release time for every journal on campus. But since I had it in the contract, they couldn't do it for *Works and Days*. And what has happened? We have *Works and Days* and just two or three other journals now. The other ones just disappeared or were carried off by other people to other institutions. Sometimes people tried to keep doing them without release time, but that usually ends up being overwhelming.

Williams: It seems like *Works and Days* has been productive for you in many ways, as it has dovetailed with your own work and thinking. On the other side, what are the dangers of editing? You probably get fatigued, and a journal can shrink in range or become too set in its ways, when it once had been on the vanguard.

Downing: Editing will damage your own scholarly output. That's just the plain truth. I get release time, one course off a semester, but I put in way more than what it would be to teach a course. The labor comes out of your scholarly production or your own writing. And that has been true of me. You need to be prepared for that as a commitment to a journal. But when I look back, I don't regret it because of the pleasures I've had.

Williams: What are the rewards?

Downing: The rewards are the kind of connectivity with colleagues on an almost daily level and collaborating with them in various ways—meeting people who are at work in the field on issues that you think are important, working with your editorial board that's around the country through email or phone or in person, and a great deal of collaboration that goes with producing these projects. For me, many of them involved symposiums of various sorts. That is something that happens in editing that doesn't happen in the same way in my own writing. You're drawing on and learning about work by new people that you didn't even know were out there, and that's rewarding. For most people in the field, I think scholarship can be somewhat isolating—you have long hours working by yourself, but editing at its best is quite collaborative in various ways.

Williams: When I edited *Minnesota Review,* I did feel like I was on the pulse of what was happening in different fields, simply because you're hearing about things in fields you don't know, not just the ones you work in. I like to say, adapting Benjamin's phrase "the author as producer," that the editor is a producer. Sometimes people think editors are like secretaries, and sometimes like genies in the machine, but it is an active task. How would you define the role of the editor?

Downing: I think the editor is a producer of new directions. If you look at the history of the theory journal, some editors were taking

the discourse of the field and providing a venue for explorations into these new areas. With *New Literary History*, what Ralph Cohen did was shape a whole movement. I don't think you can expect the profession to reward editing as much as your own scholarly writing. That's just a reality. But I think what you did with *Minnesota Review* and what I at least tried to do with *Works and Days* was to produce something that was important and wouldn't have been there if you didn't do it.

Williams: Your own writing has an affinity with the kinds of issues that you've covered and it's obvious you've drawn on and learned from the things you've published. One of your main concerns has not only been theory, but also, unlike many theorists, pedagogy. That shows up in your book *The Knowledge Contract*, where you look at textbooks, and especially in your collections *Changing Classroom Practices* and *Teaching Theory*. Tell me about that. How did you get interested in pedagogy?

Downing: I would trace it back to when I was an undergraduate. Education was such a dramatic change for me as an undergraduate in the late 1960s. I went to a very progressive liberal arts college almost accidentally—I went there on a science scholarship thinking I would go into biological research, and it totally transformed me. I became a philosophy major, and then I went to graduate school at San Francisco State in creative writing because I was deeply interested in English and the humanities and politics. I was a child of the age, and those of us who came of age in the 1960s and 70s were affected deeply by the social movements of the times, the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. I was an anti-war protester and tear-gassed in front of the mathematics building at the University of Wisconsin. These had a profound impact on me, but I had always been influenced by the social impact of writing and literature, that it was personally transformative and had deep social and political relevance.

A remarkable, fortuitous circumstance is that I got to know Kay Boyle, who had a huge impact on me in San Francisco. She taught at San Francisco State but lived right around the corner, and we became good friends. She was one of the writers in Paris in the 1920s, and she was friends with James Joyce. She loved Henry Miller but she hated Ernest Hemingway. She was still close friends with Samuel

Beckett and showed me letters he sent. I had lunch with her and William Shirer, who wrote *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. For her, writing and politics were totally enmeshed, and that was a model for me. While we were there, she just naturally pulled me into these other political arenas that she was involved with. I became involved with Amnesty International, and we worked with her circle of people, which was rather remarkable and included Caesar Chavez, Joan Baez, Paul Goodman—a lot of different people. It brought me into a circle of writers, and the political world had my head spinning.

Williams: Did you fancy being a fiction writer?

Downing: Well, I had gotten interested in writing because I had several English professors at Beloit College who had an impact on me, but I realized through my time at San Francisco State that my penchant for abstractions and critical thought was a better avenue for me than creative writing, and I wasn't as skilled as a storyteller as an analyst. I was enthralled with a linguist at San Francisco State that I had a course with, and I learned all about structural linguistics and Chomsky's transformational grammar, and that drew me to the linguistic turn.

Williams: So that's what took you to SUNY-Buffalo in literary studies and critical studies?

Downing: We went to Rochester for my wife's work at the Visual Studies Workshop. So I started my PhD at the University of Rochester, but Hayden White and Norman Brown, who were there, had just left, and I found I didn't like it because it was a quite conservative place. I had heard of Buffalo, and it was 70 miles down the road, so I visited it in the spring and told them about what I had been doing, and they let me start that fall. Buffalo was incredible. Albert Cook had built that program up, and Leslie Fiedler and Robert Creeley and Raymond Federman and Charles Bernstein were there; and Norman Holland, Murray Schwartz, René Girard, Angus Fletcher, Eugenio Donato, and Arthur Efron (with whom I worked very closely). Donato and Edgar Dryden even had Derrida come to our theory seminar. It was intense, sort of a manic experience, and I commuted for four years from Rochester.

Williams: So you were there from 1974 to 79?

Downing: 1975 to 79, when I got my first job at Eastern Illinois. I was still ABD but we had a two-year-old, and I really needed a job, and it was a tenure-track job.

Williams: What was it like taking a seminar with Leslie Fiedler?

Downing: He was so dynamic, but what I actually liked best was when I took independent seminars with him and we had conversations. I could hardly get out of his office. His mind just worked all over the place—he made connections between popular culture and literature and society and myth, which was his thing, and ideology. They were all connected. It was totally fascinating to me. I thought he was great—and completely unpretentious. He had this huge office and a secretary, but he was so laid back and countercultural at the same time. For a sixties dude like me, this was living the good life.

Williams: Your dissertation was on Hawthorne, and your first article was too. You started out as a conventional literary scholar and were an Americanist.

Downing: But I brought critical theory to the interpretation of Nathaniel Hawthorne. There was a kind of renaissance in Hawthorne studies at the time, with books by Ken Dauber, Edgar Dryden, and others at SUNY-Buffalo, and they were reassessing the politics of Hawthorne's work and looking at him as a cultural critic. And I could identify with Hawthorne as a New Englander. I had grown up around Puritan culture, but my dissertation was more interdisciplinary than you would think. But it's true, my first critical pieces were literary criticism, and I thought I would be a literary critic doing this sort of thing.

Again, a lot of my background was in philosophy and theory, and Buffalo was doing theory. I was only beginning to see the connection to institutional critique, but I didn't really have the term at that point. It was brought to fruition in 1981 when I was at Eastern Illinois and Brian and Victor Vitanza and I drove to the SCE conference at Indiana that year. That was a very important turning point for me, running into all the people I met through the SCE, and then we had a series of SCE conferences and the GRIP project.

It was all new: I hadn't seen theory being used in this way—materialist and Marxist and Foucauldian and neo-socio-historical. It also brought me back into the tradition, and I learned there were precursors, like Thorstein Veblen and Upton Sinclair's *Goose Step*, and I learned about Dick Ohmann. I read *English in America,* and I met him. So I was reading these things and influenced, as I think a lot of people in my generation were, by Foucault as well as Marx. We were trying to figure out what are we going to do about this in our lives.

Then we had that big conference in 1990 on teaching theory to undergraduates, which felt like it opened a valve because there hadn't been a conference on how theory was going to change our teaching. That was also when I started the job at IUP, which was amazing because they wanted somebody to develop the core curricula in the new doctoral program. I began in 1988, and I was hired to teach the history of theory, so my teaching was exactly in the interest I had been developing. That was fortuitous.

Williams: How did you teach the theory course?

Downing: I had been teaching the history of literary theory going back to the ancient Greeks at Illinois, and I had been using the available resources but finding that the course was in fundamental ways under-theorized and dissatisfying. It was dissatisfying because it was decontextualizing, and my notion was that we had to contextualize things and embed them in the circumstances in which they were produced. Yet the anthologies that were trying to cover, say, 2000 years ended up being a sampling of decontextualized bits from various people over 2000 years.

So I gave deep thought to that, and I had been influenced, as many of us were, by Paulo Freire and the growing movement in critical pedagogy. How do I get students involved? How do I make history a part of the present so that the archival work of turning back to history helped to understand the present better? I realized that I had to give up the sample mode. To more thickly describe history, I saw them in three cultural turns, each taking up roughly a hundred-year segment, and exhuming as much as we could in each.

Williams: I'm familiar with your plan, which goes from Plato through the Romantics and Marx, up to the contemporary. But I wonder, doesn't it reproduce the old-fashioned model, tracing the highlights

of thought from classic to romantic to modern, which abstracts those moments as special and discontinuous? Isn't there a problem with that as well?

Downing: Yes, but I found that problem was better to deal with than sampling. You're covering a huge amount of ground in a short amount of time, but this gave it more context. Any choice you make will entail problems, but, for me, thickening the discussion of the three inter-related periods was pedagogically more effective, and my point is to demonstrate that those key moments are not entirely discontinuous but formative and deeply intertwined. The historical dialectic is between the big picture frame and the more detailed historical examples.

Williams: You have focused on pedagogy probably more than most theorists, except maybe for Ohmann or Graff, and you also deal with composition.

Downing: You're right: one of things that you see particularly in English departments is a disciplinary split between composition and literature, between writing and reading, and it developed through a fairly long history that began in the late 19th century and has carried through. It's something that I found troubling and thought reproduced the very hierarchy that our theories were trying to reduce.

Williams: So what did you propose?

Downing: At IUP we tried to develop a program that integrated reading and writing, composition and literature, and cultural studies. We called it Teaching the Writing and Reading of Cultures, or the TWARC program. We tried to break down that hierarchy, although we finally failed for a lot of reasons, some of them institutional. But I still remain committed to the model because I think that these institutional divisions can sometimes be destructive of the best things we want to do.

When you start to talk more about how we teach literature, you realize that the people in composition had been taking the lead and developing the scholarship of pedagogy as a legitimate field. That drew me to writing and composition, where I got to know people like Jim Berlin. He was coming from a background in composition and saying we needed to move towards cultural criticism, so there

were natural affinities for me. The NCTE collection I did, *Changing Classroom Practices*, was cognizant of the divisions between composition and writing and has almost as many compositionists in it as literature people. And I worked with two compositionists on *Beyond English, Inc.*, which came out in 2002, and in my introductory essay I talk about the history of the division between literature and writing. The division often makes it sound like we're just consuming literature but we're producing writing, and reading and interpreting is a much more productive thing than consumption. We tend to elevate consumption over production. Why? Because we consume the artifacts of great literary works we know we can't produce. But I think it's better not to divide it by production and consumption, and look at how they're integrated.

Williams: I want to make sure to ask you about *The Knowledge Contract*, which is probably your major critical statement so far. It continues your preoccupation with the institution and the discipline, but it's also a kind of critical university study too. In that book, your key concept is the paradigm, and you're dealing with its force as an idea, but then move on to comment on English.

Downing: To do that book, I had been reading for over a decade what was called SST, Sociology of Science and Technology, or SSK, Sociology of Scientific Knowledge. I had been deeply influenced by some of the people working in it, notably by Thomas Kuhn and his notion of paradigms. For him, you have a normal practice based on the protocols of the ruling paradigm, and then abnormalities occur (such as new data that's incommensurable with the paradigm), and those abnormalities build up, leading to a shift to a new paradigm, that has new normal practices. A dominant way of thinking about social change was that we needed a new paradigm, and that would be a revolutionary change. But I thought this was a terrible mistake: Kuhn's main point is that disciplinarity works by having a normal practice, shifting, and then reestablishing a new normal practice. Kuhn's book was a historically accurate description of the limiting and conservative nature of disciplinary institutions. So my intervention in that book was to say that.

Williams: So the book is a correction of how we see Kuhn, and also of sixties revolutionary thinking in some ways?

Downing: For Kuhn, you had an anomaly that didn't fit within the current paradigm, and the anomaly created stress. That might be true, but the discipline and the institution would re-assimilate it, so nothing significantly changed about disciplinary hierarchies of power. The institution could remain basically the same if you switched from Isaac Newton to Heisenberg or to an Einsteinian theory of relativity; or, closer to home, from New Criticism to postructuralism. That didn't produce any necessary social or institutional change other than in the secondary sources.

I saw it in terms of our discipline and how English departments are structured. I thought if we were going to break the hierarchy between composition and writing, we had to be careful about the kinds of activities that we were assimilating to the disciplinary model. The division itself tended to favor the critical models and grading practices in literary studies versus those in writing. I found that many in composition studies also felt this way. For instance, I thought that Mina Shaugnessy's *Errors and Expectations* was a way of opening up the possibility of negotiating between students coming into the academy with their home discourses that are full of what we call "errors." We can't just go correct them, enforcing grammar rules.

That said, I was not making an argument about abandoning all disciplinary work. That would be foolish. The social force of paradigms for us is the struggle to reach consensus in as broad a base as we can through peer review. I think that remains important, but it's not the only way we learn. As an institution, the disciplinary way had a liability in its dependence on formal structures that lent themselves to exploitation by movements like standardization, assessment, and control—basically surveillance models. And I thought we had to be careful because the normalizing force of our paradigms was moving more and more towards an accounting model. The commodification of everything was moving into the university. As Stefan Collini says in a line that I really like, not everything that counts can be counted. But we can evaluate and judge things, and for that we need narratives, qualitative descriptions, and discursive modes rather than only statistical objectivity and quantitative norms. Such qualitative evaluation calls for time, effort, and resources—the very things that market control tries to minimize.

Williams: In the book, you also introduce your idea of the contract. What is the knowledge contract?

Downing: The short answer is that the knowledge contract is one form of the broader social contract. As Rousseau conceived it, the social contract was an implicit obligation for any ruling body to serve all citizens and to protect them from economic or political exploitation. In contrast, capitalism contracts everything explicitly as a way of maximizing profit, exploiting labor, and protecting the sovereignty of nation states. But explicit contracts can also protect the vulnerable as, for instance, when union contracts preserve rights for workers, or when government regulations protect indigenous peoples' land from oil exploration. Similarly, the knowledge contract invokes an implicit agreement among all citizens that the knowledge commons is a public good. And that calls for some very explicit contracts—which is what collective bargaining and academic freedom are all about—and for more public funding for the commons, and more protection from privatization by corporate interests. Cheap teaching models, resulting from the pressure of commodifying everything, deplete the knowledge contract.

Williams: What do see you as the hope of the university? And what are its dangers?

Downing: The dangers are obviously the encroachment and the commodification of everything. The hope is that, if you look at the history—and you've chronicled this in your work—the significance of the university in the current political economy is vast and deep. That is not without hope, because higher education now occupies a powerful place in the current political economy. When 3% or 4% of people in 1900 attended higher education, it was an elite club to the side, but when 60 to 70% of high school graduates are going on to some form of higher education, we have an enormous public, and a public responsibility.

A lot of traditional scholarship reproduces the ideology of individualism, but I think at heart the university is the production of solidarity through a belief in the knowledge commons, a kind of shared educational resource that should, in principle, be open and available to everyone.

Williams: One last question: how do you reflect on your career? You're retiring from the editorship, so it's a time of wrapping up things.

Downing: My gut reaction is that I've been so incredibly fortunate in my life. In a time when Buffalo was a watershed of theory, of 22 graduates in my class in 1979, only about 10 of us got tenure-track jobs at universities. In one of my interviews, they told me there were 900 applicants for the job. But I got a tenure-track job. It was in the cornfields of Illinois, but I had wonderful colleagues there. Brian came there, and we started *Works and Days*, and I got support, and there was real collaboration. So I was fortunate there.

And I feel very lucky to have ended up at IUP and fortunate that my two jobs were in public higher education, which I remain committed to, and worked under collective bargaining as a faculty union member. IUP has supported me and in most ways been very good to me. I see that it's not as fortunate for my students who are facing horrible job prospects now. And it was not fortunate for many of my peers when I came out and got my first job. A lot of them were very smart people and they ended up as what we called intellectual migrant workers, teaching as adjuncts, or leaving the field. So I mostly feel grateful for my career. If everybody could have careers like mine, we wouldn't have problems in the profession. You have to work hard at IUP, and it's a heavy teaching load, so it's not an ideal, but with the kind of job security I've had in a time when precariousness is the main condition, I feel fortunate for the security I've had, relatively speaking. I wish it on everybody.