THERE ARE AMONG US skeptics who insist that academic critical theory has nothing to do with the core activities of special collections librarians—the acquisition, preservation, and accessibility of primary research materials. For those adhering to the more traditional philosophical underpinnings of special collections librarianship an alternative intellectual posture may threaten to disturb ideas thought inviolate. Proponents of the critical theory argument believe that every action and decision is informed by a set of epistemological acts to which the more general term of “theory” is applied. Lacking the familiar and tangible practicality, this becomes a disquieting and controversial position. And, while the skeptics eventually may be correct there is a steadily growing cohort of scholars suggesting otherwise.

The dichotomy formed by this difference in perspective is not new. The history of English literary studies over the past century is marked by a division between textual and bibliographical studies on the one hand, and criticism and critical theory on the other. Special collections librarianship, to a large extent, is an outgrowth of textual studies, while critical theory grew forth from criticism.

RBMS placed itself in the vanguard of this controversy at an early stage. The 1995 RBMS Preconference, “Collecting Cultures: The Politics and Practice of Building Special Collections,” was one of the first scholarly conferences to address theoretical concerns as they relate to special collections librarianship. More recently the SHARP listserv has sponsored
a discussion that focused on theoretical concerns and the “New History of the Book.”

The 2001 RBMS Preconference, “The Twentieth Century,” gave rise to excellent papers devoted to the application of critical theory with regard to twentieth century collecting, literary explication, and how we, as special collections professionals, approach the tasks that support collecting and literary research. Several weeks later a symposium sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries brought together directors of ARL libraries and their special collections librarians to discuss the future of special collections within the research library context. This provocative meeting sought to develop an agenda for ARL in the face of the changing practice of special collections librarianship. From this summer’s conferences, we have brought together a series of papers that reflect directly on theoretical concerns as in the essays by Stephen Enniss and Libbie Rifkin about literary collecting, or indirectly in Henry Lowood’s thought-provoking piece about collecting the history of software. We have coupled them with Bob Byrd’s reasoned account of how special collections and ARL can go into the future—a future that has been shaped by the academic trends implied by critical theory.

Widespread affirmation of the appropriateness of critical theory to special collections librarianship may not arrive soon, if ever. Nevertheless, the papers included here raise the issues and advance the ideas in well-argued and persuasive manners. Accept them with complicity or renounce them in disagreement. In either event we hope these engaging and challenging articles provide the occasion for us to reconsider our relationship to theory and the role played by the history of literary studies in the twentieth century.